

# The Housman Society Journal

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# The Housman Society

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**December 2016**

The Housman Lecture	<i>Peter Parker</i>	5
Laurence Housman and the Lord Chamberlain	<i>Elizabeth Oakley</i>	25
A.E. Housman's early biographers	<i>Martin Blocksidge</i>	35
The Clock House	<i>Julian Hunt</i>	62
Wake: The Silver Dusk Returning	<i>Andrew Breeze</i>	71
William Housman in Brighton	<i>Julian Hunt</i>	82
'Your affectionate but inefficient godfather': the letters of A.E. Housman to G.C.A. Jackson	<i>David Butterfield</i>	89
Biographies of Contributors		102
The Housman Society and Journal		104



## The Housman Lecture: May 2016

### The Name and Nature of Poetry

*Peter Parker*

This lecture takes its name from one given, very unwillingly, by A.E. Housman in Cambridge on 9 May 1933. It was as a poet rather than as a Classics scholar that Housman was invited to deliver the annual Leslie Stephen Lecture, which was named in honour of the critic and founder-editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. ‘As this must be on a literary subject it will give me a great deal of trouble to compose,’ Housman grumbled, ‘and I shall not enjoy myself in the vacation, which began yesterday.’ In his correspondence he referred to it as ‘that infernal lecture’, complained that the writing of it left him time for nothing else, and agreed only very reluctantly to it being published, as was the custom. I hope that I can be rather more gracious than this, and I start by thanking the Housman Society for inviting me to talk today on ‘The Name and Nature of Poetry’.

Rather than drawing upon that 1933 lecture, I’d like to turn to something Housman had written about poetry eighteen years earlier, in a letter of condolence to his sister Kate, whose son Clement had been killed in action at the Battle of Loos. ‘I do not know that I can do better than send you some verses that I wrote many years ago,’ Housman wrote; ‘because the essential business of poetry, as it has been said, is to harmonise the sadness of the universe, and it is somehow more sustaining and more healing than prose.’ The person who said this was none other than Sir Leslie Stephen in his *A History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876), and Housman had copied the observation into a notebook, along with the statement that immediately preceded it: ‘Nothing is less poetical than optimism’.<sup>1</sup> Optimism is certainly not something that characterises Housman’s own poetry, although I think we must allow that the dark humour that so enlivens his letters is not entirely absent from his famously gloomy verses. For example, I’m not sure that it is entirely clear how seriously we are meant to take these two stanzas from ‘Twice a week the winter through’, poem XVII of *A Shropshire Lad*:

1. *Letters* (Burnett ed.), I.347.

Now in Maytime to the wicket  
Out I march with bat and pad:  
See the son of grief at cricket  
Trying to be glad.

Try I will; no harm in trying:  
Wonder 'tis how little mirth  
Keeps the bones of man from lying  
On the bed of earth.

The man who wrote these lines was the same one who, when sending a copy of his *Last Poems* to his friend Moses Jackson, who was seriously ill in hospital, would write: 'The cheerful and exhilarating tone of my verse is so notorious that I feel sure it will do you more good than the doctors', and who gave permission for that same volume to appear in a Braille edition on the grounds that, as he put it, 'The blind want cheering up'. Carefully deployed irony is of course as notable a feature of Housman's poetry as it is of his correspondence, the inevitable response, perhaps, of someone who had at an early age seen God's works clearly and found them wanting. Housman may not have really believed that the purpose of poetry, and of his own poetry in particular, was to cheer people up, but the notion that poetry is 'somehow more sustaining and more healing than prose' was his own gloss upon Leslie Stephen's definition.

Harmonizing the sadness of the universe may seem a rather large task for poetry: but did Stephen mean that poetry drew all that sadness together into harmony, or did he mean that it provided, as it were, the tune for that sadness, and therefore made it more bearable? Given Housman's frequent insistence that he knew nothing about music, we might assume that he thought Stephen meant the former. In the course of writing my book, however, I discovered an unpublished letter that Housman had written to the composer Arthur Somervell that suggests he knew much more about music than he pretended, and was perfectly able, for example, to discuss the differences between the diatonic and chromatic scales. I therefore conclude that Housman had the specifically musical notion of harmonizing in mind when he quoted Stephen's definition. He may also have been thinking more

specifically of his own poetry, in which personal sadness is harmonized and made into art. As E.M. Forster noted in the commonplace book he started keeping in 1921: '*Literature as Compensation* "I shall make something out of this some day" must have occurred to many an unhappy man of letters, and to *have* made something is possible – Heine, A.E. Housman, Shakespeare avow it.'

Housman denied that the poems in *A Shropshire Lad* were the result of 'a crisis of pessimism'. He was not a pessimist, he explained, but a 'pejorist', someone who believes the world is getting worse rather than better - 'and that,' he added, 'is owing to my observation of the world not to personal experience.' We now know that personal experience had a considerable influence upon the poetry Housman wrote, and that it was his own world, rather than the one he merely observed, that had gone awry in his early years. His beloved mother had died on his twelfth birthday, something that, according to Kate, 'roused within him an early resentment against nature's relentless ways of destruction' – a frequent theme of his poems. Having arrived at Oxford on a scholarship and garlanded with almost every prize his school could offer, Housman fell in love with someone who was unable to respond in kind, lost his faith in Christianity, and ended up failing his finals. Although he clawed his way back spectacularly from this wholly unexpected educational catastrophe, becoming the leading Classicist of his age as well as a hugely popular poet, what he called 'the great and real troubles of my early manhood' would dog him his entire life, as would his hopeless, unreciprocated love for Moses Jackson. The very act of creating poetry was a way of confronting these troubles, containing difficult and upsetting feelings within the framework of verse that is both conventional in its form (requiring scansion and rhyme) and mostly very brief in its extent. In his Leslie Stephen Lecture, Housman dismissed the Metaphysical Poets as 'intellectually frivolous', but he would surely have agreed with John Donne, who wrote in 'The Triple Fool':

I thought, if I could draw my pains  
Through rhyme's vexation, I should them allay.  
Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,  
For he tames it, that fetters it in verse.

The sustaining and healing that poetry supposedly provided for both writers and readers was in great demand when Housman wrote that letter of condolence to his sister. By the autumn of 1915 the First World War had been going on for over a year and the appalling death toll was steadily mounting. Given that we are just a month away from the centenary of the First Day on the Somme, 1 July 1916, on which the British Army suffered some 60,000 casualties in 24 hours, it seems appropriate to consider the poetry that was being written and read at a time when ‘the sadness of the universe’ had become particularly acute.

Whether or not Kate found the poem Housman sent her consoling is not known, but she must have approved of its subsequent publication in a memorial supplement of her son’s school magazine, where it appeared under the heading ‘In Memoriam / C.A.S.’. It had in fact already been published, in a slightly different form and under the title ‘Illic Jacet’ (‘There lies...’) in the *Academy* magazine in February 1900, and was a poem of the South African War rather than the First World War.

Oh hard is the bed they have made him,  
And common the blanket and cheap;  
But there he will lie as they laid him:  
Where else could you trust him to sleep?

To sleep when the bugle is crying  
And cravens have heard and are brave,  
When mothers and sweethearts are sighing  
And lads are in love with the grave.

Oh dark is the chamber and lonely,  
And lights and companions depart;  
But lief will he lose them and only  
Behold the desire of his heart.

And low is the roof, but it covers  
A sleeper content to repose;  
And far from his friends and his lovers  
He lies with the sweetheart he chose.



The sustaining and healing qualities of this poem are neither conventional nor immediately obvious. Housman's concern is principally for the dead soldier rather than those who are mourning him, and this is something that the poem shares with the best-known poetry of the First World War, where the emotional focus tends to be upon dead or suffering fellow-soldiers rather than bereaved or anxious wives and sweethearts at home. Housman knew about the lives and fates of ordinary soldiers because his youngest brother, Herbert, had enlisted in the ranks and been killed in the Boer War – though this particular poem was written before Herbert's death. In the letter to Kate that accompanied the poem, Housman wrote of Clement: 'I remember your telling me at the beginning of the war that he had almost a hope and expectation of dying in battle, and we must be glad that it was a victorious battle in which he died.' The letter was written on 5 October 1915, while the Battle of Loos was still in progress, and that doyen of military historians Basil Liddell Hart would later conclude that the battle 'had not improved the general situation in any way and had brought nothing but useless slaughter of infantry'. Clement's battalion, the 10<sup>th</sup> Gloucesters, had however led the attack on the German lines on the first day of the battle and was reported to have 'advanced through all objectives despite heavy casualties'. Whether or not Clement's attitude to war and fate had been accurately characterised by his mother, it would have seemed very familiar to anyone who knew his uncle's poetry.

*A Shropshire Lad* is full of doomed young men who are so dogged by bad luck that they more or less will themselves into the grave; and the grave is the favoured destiny of the soldier in 'Illic Jacet'. It might be argued that the key to the poem as a work of consolation lies in the question 'Where else could you trust him to sleep?', by which I take Housman to mean that in the permanent sleep of death the soldier is out of danger and therefore no longer a cause of anxiety to those at home. It reminds me of what he would write when he heard of the death of Moses Jackson: 'Now I can die myself: I could not have borne to leave him behind me in a world where anything might happen to him.' That said, Housman had also asked for his condolences to be passed on to Clement's fiancée, and it would be interesting to know how sustaining and healing 'the poor young girl' would have found the poem's concluding assertion that 'far from his friends and

his lovers', the soldier 'lies with the sweetheart he chose'.

Although his work is often included in anthologies of First World War poetry, Housman wrote only one poem in direct response to the conflict. 'Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries' appeared in *The Times* on 31 October 1917 beneath the day's leader on

'The Anniversary of Ypres'

These, in the day when heaven was falling,  
The hour when earth's foundations fled,  
Followed their mercenary calling  
And took their wages and are dead.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;  
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;  
What God abandoned, these defended,  
And saved the sum of things for pay.

At a time when most of the war poetry that appeared in newspapers extolled selfless patriotism, 'devotion to duty' and 'the supreme sacrifice', the very title of this poem seemed provocative. Housman was, however, referring to the original British Expeditionary Force, made up of professional soldiers who were technically mercenaries because they took the king's shilling in exchange for fighting wherever the army sent them. At the same time, he was rebutting German propaganda that had dismissed the BEF as nothing *but* mercenaries. The Scottish politician and writer William Darling would declare in 1931 that the poem 'does in eight lines what the official histories of the war cannot do in volumes', while Kipling described its two brief stanzas as 'the finest lines of poetry written during the war'. Nevertheless, Housman's plain speaking was not the kind of thing that appeared in such popular wartime anthologies as E.B. Osborn's *The Muse in Arms*. Published a month after Housman's 'Epitaph' had appeared in *The Times*, Osborn's book has been described as one of several 'important anthologies in the canonization of poetic taste'. This is undoubtedly true, but the poetic taste of 1917 was very different from the poetic taste of today so far as the First World War is concerned.

Our notion of what constitutes ‘War Poetry’ has been formed by such writers as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden and Isaac Rosenberg, whose angry or anguished work was intended to perform a very different function from the one suggested by Housman. Indeed, in the draft preface to his projected volume of war poems, Owen specifically insisted that the book was ‘in no sense consolatory’. A 1978 bibliography lists 2,225 published war poets from Britain and Ireland, and that handful of writers we now think of as the war’s major and most representative poets were not in fact that well known while the conflict was still taking place. Edmund Blunden published only three poems between 1914 and 1918, and all of them in his old school’s magazine. Similarly, only two of Isaac Rosenberg’s war poems were published during the war – and both of them only in the United States (in Harriet Monroe’s Chicago-based *Poetry*). A mere six of Wilfred Owen’s poems were published before his death on 4 November 1918, and only two of these – ‘The Dead-Beat’ (in a revised version) and ‘Futility’ – made it into the volume that established his reputation, his posthumously published *Poems* of 1920. Sassoon and Graves both published volumes of poetry during the war, but the consolatory verses of Rupert Brooke and a host of other writers whose names now mean nothing were far more popular and widely read. For example Osborn’s anthology includes more poems by the now more or less forgotten Robert Nichols than by any other writer: ten poems compared with three by Graves and only two each by Brooke and Sassoon. Even as late as 1919, in a biographical volume titled *The New Elizabethans: A First Selection of the Lives of Young Men who have Fallen in the Great War*, Osborn describes Nichols as ‘the greatest of the war poets as yet published’. Nichols had not in fact fallen in the Great War: indeed, he had barely *fought* in it. He was gazetted a second lieutenant in the Field Artillery in October 1914, but suffered ill health and spent only the few weeks between late June and early August 1916 on the Western Front before being declared permanently unfit and returned to England. Out of this brief experience he had produced a volume of overwrought verses titled *Ardours and Endurances*, published in 1917, and he frequently gave histrionic public readings of these poems, in which (as Sassoon tactfully put it) his zealotry tended to outrun his discretion. Such poems as ‘The Assault’ attempt to give an impression of what battle was like, complete with sound effects:

Shells like shrieking birds rush over;  
Crash and din rise higher.  
A stream of lead raves  
Over us from the left... (we safe under cover!)  
Crash. Reverberation. Crash!  
Acrid smoke billowing. Flash upon flash.

And so on. Elsewhere Nichols takes up the stance of the noble warrior, as in these verses from 'The Approach':

Nearer and even nearer...  
My body tired but tense  
Hovers 'twixt vague pleasure  
And tremulous confidence.

Arms to have and to use them,  
And a soul to be made  
Worthy if not worthy;  
If afraid, unafraid!

To endure for a little,  
To endure and have done:  
Men I love about me,  
Over me the sun!

And should at last suddenly  
Fly the speeding death:  
The four great quarters of heaven  
Receive this little breath.

I quote these poems not to mock Nichols, but to show what was considered 'the greatest' war poetry during and in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, what kind of poetry reportedly stirred wartime audiences on the home front. They are no better and not much worse than most of the other poems that Osborn selected for *The Muse in Arms*. That anthology's

somewhat cumbersome subtitle emphasised that what it offered was ‘genuine’ war poetry, which is to say poetry written by combatants rather than home-front observers: ‘A collection of war poems, for the most part written in the field of action by seamen, soldiers, and flying men who are serving, or have served, in the Great War’. In his Introduction, Osborn explains that ‘The object of this Anthology is to show what passes in the British warrior’s soul when, in moments of aspiration or inspiration, before or after action or in the busy days of self-preparation for self-sacrifice, he has glimpses of the ultimate significance of warfare.’ There is, alas, rather more aspiration than inspiration in the poems that follow, and the general tone of the book may be judged by the fact that Sassoon’s ‘glimpses of the ultimate significance of warfare’ are restricted to the poems ‘Absolution’ and ‘The Rear-Guard’. As its title suggests, the first of these poems conforms to notions of radiant self-sacrifice of the sort Rupert Brooke embodied:

Horror of wounds and anger at the foe,  
And loss of things desired; all these must pass.  
We are the happy legion, for we know  
Time’s but a golden wind that shakes the grass.

The poem was written between April and September 1915: Sassoon first went to the front in late November of that year. ‘People used to feel like this when they “joined up” in 1914 and 1915,’ he later commented. ‘No one feels it when they “go out again”.’ ‘The Rear-Guard’ is more recognizably a Sassoon poem, though one that graphically describes trench experience rather than criticizing the conduct of the war, as his more famous satirical verses do. Poems such as ‘The Optimist’, which referred to an attack as ‘a senseless, bloody stunt’ would have been available to Osborn but were evidently not the kind of thing he thought suitable for inclusion. Along with the whizz-bang verses of Robert Nichols and a vivid poem about the aftermath of the Battle of Loos by a sergeant in the Irish Rifles called Patrick MacGill, Sassoon’s ‘The Rear-Guard’ does at least introduce a glimpse of the realities of the front to the anthology’s section of ‘Battle Pieces’, which is otherwise filled with such verses as Willoughby Weaving’s ‘Birds in the Trenches’ and Herbert Asquith’s ‘To a Baby found paddling near the Lines’. It is equally telling that E.A. Mackintosh, a fine Scottish poet

killed at Cambrai in November 1917, is represented in the anthology by a poem celebrating the ‘Departure of the 4<sup>th</sup> Camerons’. Good as this is in its elegiac Housman-like way, one would not guess from it that Mackintosh was capable of writing quite as savagely as Sassoon.

It was Mackintosh who had neatly adapted Tennyson’s ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ to the experiences of the First World War ranker:

Into the mouth of hell,  
Sticking it pretty well,  
Slouched the six hundred.

Readers of *The Muse in Arms* would look in vain for this kind of resigned realism. As Osborn writes, the poems he has collected illustrate the British soldier’s ‘singular capacity for remembering the splendour and forgetting the squalor of the dreadful vocation in which he was so suddenly engaged’. The supposed authenticity of a poem had more to do with experience than with expression, and the idea that front-line service was what really counted was taken to its logical conclusion by A. St John Adcock in his 1918 survey, *For Remembrance: Soldier Poets who have Fallen in the War*. As the very young but clear-eyed poet Charles Hamilton Sorley commented after reading about Rupert Brooke’s death in *The Morning Post*, the newspaper, ‘which has always hitherto disapproved of him, is now loud in his praises because he has conformed to their stupid axiom of literary criticism that the only stuff of poetry is violent physical experience by dying on active service.’ Of the forty-four poets selected by Adcock, only Sorley himself, Brooke, Mackintosh, Edward Thomas, W.N. Hodgson and Julian Grenfell have any lasting reputation – the last two for a single poem each. The general tenor of the volume may be judged by Adcock’s description at the beginning of the book of ‘public gardens and recreation areas’ that had been used for military training and now look ‘strangely desolate’. ‘Our hearts know what these barren places mean,’ Adcock writes, ‘for the shadow of their barrenness falls far across the lives we lead. Some day the grass will grow again and happiness return to some of us, but there is too much gone that can never return.

‘Yet in our hearts, too, we know on an afterthought, that

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail  
Or knock the breast – nothing but well and fair,  
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.’

The quotation, silently edited, is from Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* and is intended to be in every sense consolatory.

One of the now forgotten poets Adcock singles out for praise is Harold Parry, killed in action in May 1917 shortly after his twentieth birthday. ‘His sympathies went out to the weak and the wronged,’ Adcock writes; ‘for all his youth he had probed much into the world’s unhappiness.’ This sounds not unlike Housman, and so it is perhaps unsurprising that a copy of *A Shropshire Lad* was found on Parry’s body – though his own poetry, unlike that of some of his better known contemporaries, shows no sign that the book had any influence upon his actual writing. What Adcock calls ‘the true gold of [Parry’s] poetry’ is hardly discernible in the anodyne lines he quotes, which conform to the high-flown rhetoric that characterises so much of the verse written during the war. This is the kind of verse we no longer read, but which perhaps did something to harmonise the sadness of the universe for those who needed to believe that their fathers, sons, fiancés, friends and brothers had died in a noble cause rather than being uselessly sacrificed – which is one of the principal messages of the war poetry we *do* still read. Even some of these poems are enlisted into the ennobling and self-sacrificial narrative that Adcock has constructed. Of Charles Sorley’s famous ‘All the hills and vales along’, for example, Adcock writes: ‘Here, in a splendour of a bizarre metaphysical fantasy, is the rapt sense of mystical joy in dying for a great end that shines in Grenfell’s ‘Into Battle’ and Rupert Brooke’s “If I should die think only this of me...”’ That Adcock could so badly misread Sorley’s distinctly sceptical and Housman-inflected poem suggests that writers needed to employ the sometimes crude but effective directness of a Sassoon to avoid their poems being misrepresented and so corralled into the high-flown notion of what constituted war poetry that still persisted in the last year of the conflict.

So much for the kind of poetry that was popular on the home front: but what did poetry mean to those who marched off to war in 1914? One of the things for which Robert Nichols *is* remembered is his assertion that by the outbreak of the war the one book that was ‘in every pocket’ was *A*

*Shropshire Lad*. This may be something of an exaggeration, but there is a good deal of anecdotal evidence that many men, like Harold Parry, carried the book with them to the front. Siegfried Sassoon's copy, for example, a pocket edition published in 1912, is inscribed 'Siegfried Sassoon / 1st R.W. Fus. Nov. 1915 / 2nd R.W. Fus. March 1917 / 25th R.W. Fus. March 1918': in other words he had carried the book with him to the Western Front, then to the Middle East, and then back to France. Patrick Shaw-Stewart had followed his own notion that 'all great men carry [Housman] next to their heart' by taking his copy of *A Shropshire Lad* with him to the Aegean in preparation for the Gallipoli landings. After he was killed in action, the book was returned to his family, who discovered the war poem that made him famous, 'I saw a man this morning', written on its back flyleaf. It was not just poets who took Housman to war, however. On a visit to the Western Front in his capacity as a journalist St John Adcock noted that the three volumes of poetry most in demand among men in the rest camps were Robert Browning's *Men and Women*, Edward Fitzgerald's translation of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* and *A Shropshire Lad*. 'We all had a copy of *The Shropshire Lad* in our pockets,' remembered Thomas Armstrong, the future director of the Royal Academy of Music who had served on the Western Front from 1917. In 1976 Armstrong paid tribute to his friend the composer Willie B. Manson, who had set several of Housman's poems and had been killed on the First Day on the Somme, which also happened to be his twentieth birthday. 'Like many of our generation we were obsessed by *A Shropshire Lad*,' Armstrong recalled, 'and I [still] have the copy that Manson gave me in 1914. The copy that I gave him was never found after his death. It must have been blown up with him.'

Housman's principal concern from the very outset was that his first book of poetry should be both affordable and portable, and this had led his publisher to issue a 'waistcoat pocket edition' in 1904, retailing at just sixpence. The novelist Penelope Fitzgerald, writing of her father's generation who had become young men in the 1900s, observed that they were great readers of poetry: 'The "pocket anthology" fitted into a Norfolk jacket and could be taken out on long weekend walks.' She wrote. '*The Golden Treasury* (1891 edition) was the right size for this, so too was *A Shropshire Lad*.' Housman's volume had become a best-seller during the first decade of the twentieth century: in 1905 it sold 886 copies, but by



1911 the average yearly sale was an astonishing 13,500 copies. People who swapped their Norfolk jackets for khaki found that the book fitted equally neatly into a uniform pocket, and its popularity continued throughout the war. When the cover price had to be increased in 1918 owing to the wartime 'cost of labour and material', Housman had worried whether enough people would pay 1s 6d to justify a proposed new print run of 5,000 copies; but the book went on to sell more than three times that number by the end of the year.

The war saw a massive increase in reading in general and the reading of poetry in particular. Education Acts in the nineteenth century meant that literacy had vastly increased among ordinary British troops, while the humanities-based education most officers had received at their public school had given them a very good grounding in both Classical and English literature. As with film-making, in warfare there was a lot of hanging around waiting for the call to action, and soldiers read partly to keep boredom at bay; but they also read for the very reason that literature could be both 'sustaining' and 'healing'. *The Times* newspaper's 'Broadsheets' – in fact single sheets of ordinary notepaper on which were printed 'Six Selected Extracts from Great English Writers' for inexpensive front-line reading – were intended to give soldiers the best that literature could offer in an easily portable and digestible form. It was explained that they were 'not designed to instruct, or to improve; but merely to give recreation to those who, in the drudgery no less than the danger of war, so sorely need rest and distraction.' In December 1915, four months after the initiative was launched, a grateful soldier wrote from 'A Hospital, Somewhere in France' that the Broadsheets provided 'an example of English literature's beguilement, comfort and sustainment for the warrior'. Naturally the Broadsheets reproduced such stirring stuff as the St Crispin's day speech from *Henry V*, Macaulay's 'The Armada' and Drayton's 'The Ballad of Agincourt', but there was also a good deal of poetry about English life, English landscape and the English character, reminding soldiers where they came from and of the values they were fighting to defend. Broadsheet No. 38 reproduced six poems from *A Shropshire Lad* in which two of the book's recurring themes, the military calling and an unchanging English landscape, were well represented.

Part of the reason the *Times* Broadsheets were welcome in the trenches was that, despite a good deal of hanging about, many soldiers

rarely had the uninterrupted time to concentrate on and read right through full-length novels or other books. Anthologies and books of poetry that you could dip in and out of were far more practical, and ‘beguilement, comfort and sustainment’ were also offered by such volumes as *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, edited by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch in 1910 and Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* in the expanded 1891 edition mentioned by Penelope Fitzgerald. Here was the best that English poetry could provide, words that not only sustained and healed but represented the centuries-long national heritage for which people were now fighting. Robert Bridges’ *The Spirit of Man*, published in 1916, and Ernest Rhys’s *The Old Country*, published in association with the YMCA the following year, also proved popular. As its title suggests, the first of these anthologies, for which the then Poet Laureate had made selections ‘in English & French from the Philosophers & Poets’, had a high moral purpose. It was, however, also intended to conform to Leslie Stephen’s and A.E. Housman’s notions of the harmonizing and consoling purpose of poetry. As Bridges puts it in his Preface:

From the consequent miseries [of what he saw as Prussian aggression], the insensate and interminable slaughter, the hate and filth, we can turn to seek comfort only in the quiet confidence of our souls; and we look instinctively to the seers and poets of mankind, whose sayings are the oracles and prophecies of loveliness and lovingkindness. Common diversions divert us no longer; our habits and thoughts are searched by the glare of the conviction that man’s life is not the ease that a peace-loving generation has found it or thought to make it, but the awful conflict with evil which philosophers and saints have depicted; and it is in their abundant testimony to the good and beautiful that we find support for our faith, and distraction from a grief that is intolerable constantly to face...

Subtitled ‘A Book of Love & Praise of England’, Rhys’s *The Old Country* was more specifically patriotic. Its front endpaper reproduced a line drawing of an idealized English landscape with a river running through it and ploughed fields and a cathedral city in the distance, all framed by an oak tree. Superimposed on this image was a panel bearing the lines ‘Nor,

England, did I know till then / What love I bore to thee' from Wordsworth's 'I travelled among unknown men'. Rhys nods to Palgrave when he writes in his Editor's Note that 'The practical use of such a kit-book or hut-book lies in its pocketable size and its effect as golden remembrancer'. His book gathers together poems and prose that evoke memories of an immemorial England of the kind it was felt serving soldiers dreamed about in the trenches.

Given that the granting of home leave could be erratic, soldiers did indeed hunger for books that would remind them of the world they had left behind them, and Ronald Blythe has observed that 'The homesickness of the First World War was expressed more in terms of places than of people'. In the minds of many soldiers, the 'England' for which they were fighting was not really the whole country or a set of ideals but the places they knew and loved. At a time when people tended to spend their lives in one place rather than move around as they do today, 'England' conjured up a particular part of the country: a village, a street, a house, a landscape, a view. English poetry is filled with evocations of English places, both specific and generic: the first poem in Palgrave's *Treasury* is Thomas Nash's 'Spring', from his 1592 play *Summers Last Will and Testament*, in which 'shepherds pipe all day' in the daisy-spangled English fields; while the first poem in *The Oxford Book of English Verse* is the well-known Medieval round 'Sumer is icumen in'. Both poems reach back into a distant and yet still recognizable pastoral England of peace and harmony. By 1900 only twenty-three per cent of the inhabitants of England and Wales still lived in rural districts, but for many people 'England' continued to mean a gentle landscape of small villages, ancient parish churches, picturesque rose-wreathed cottages, and teams of horses ploughing the fields.

It is easy to see where *A Shropshire Lad* fitted into this dream of England. As George Orwell observed in a celebrated essay written during the Second World War, Housman's book is 'full of the charm of buried villages, the nostalgia of place-names, Clunton and Clunbury, Knighton, Ludlow, "on Wenlock Edge", "in summer time on Bredon", thatched roofs and the jingle of smithies, the wild jonquils in the pastures of the "blue remembered hills".' Furthermore, many poems look back to this 'land of lost content' from a remote and alien locale: the yearning for familiar places that Housman's Lad feels when exiled in London would seem very familiar to

those now fighting in foreign fields where landscapes and villages had been obliterated by heavy artillery. These feelings, this sadness, was certainly harmonized by Housman's poetry. It was not simply the rural background of the poems that appealed to those on the battlefields. 'My chief object in publishing my verses was to give pleasure to a few young men here and there,' Housman once said, and his intended audience had always been 'ordinary' readers rather than the literary elite. These were indeed young men's poems, and the feelings they describe were intensified in wartime: close masculine friendships; a sense that life is unjust and that fate is against one; the notion that life is passing all too quickly and that death is always standing by, ready to harvest the young. These themes might not at first glance seem very consoling, but as St John Adcock wrote of the book:

what is loosely called its pessimism is not so much that as a courageously stoical acceptance of the stern facts of human experience. The soldier who could find any pleasure at all in verse was in no mood, just then, for gracious sentiments or optimistic fantasies; he was up against stark realities; accustomed to the sight of death and the thought of its immanence [sic, for imminence], had shed all his illusions, found a fearful and perhaps morbid joy in treating such things as a grim jest, and the honest facing of the truth in 'The Shropshire Lad', its wry, whimsical, indomitable realism, must have chimed with his own thoughts and strengthened him to endure that fate that is, in the long run, common to all men.

On the home front too, poems such as 'The lads in their hundreds to Ludlow come in for the fair' (*ASL* XXIII) struck a particular chord with those who had seen their own young men march off to war.

The lads in their hundreds to Ludlow come in for the fair,  
There's men from the barn and the forge and the mill and the fold,  
The lads for the girls and the lads for the liquor are there,  
And there with the rest are the lads that will never be old.

There's chaps from the town and the field and the till and the cart,  
And many to count are the stalwart, and many the brave,  
And many the handsome of face and the handsome of heart,  
And few that will carry their looks or their truth to the grave.

I wish one could know them, I wish there were tokens to tell  
The fortunate fellows that now you can never discern;  
And then one could talk with them friendly and wish them farewell  
And watch them depart on the way that they will not return.

But now you may stare as you like and there's nothing to scan;  
And brushing your elbow unguessed-at and not to be told  
They carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man,  
The lads that will die in their glory and never be old.

Often included in anthologies of First World War poetry, this poem was not only written twenty years before that war but is not even specifically a war poem. Lads in other poems in the volume, such as '1887', 'The Recruit', 'The street sounds to the soldiers' tread' and 'On the idle hill of summer', are depicted in uniform, 'Soldiers marching all to die'. But the lads in this poem have merely come to Ludlow to enjoy themselves, and there is nothing to suggest that they 'will die in their glory and never be old' as the result of military action. It is simply the case that 'those whom the gods love die young', a notion with which Housman the Classicist would be very familiar – as indeed would all those classically-educated young men who served as junior officers in the war, often leading their equally young soldiers over the top to almost certain death. It is poems such as this one that prompted the American poet Robert Lowell to write: 'One feels Housman foresaw the Somme.'

The rhetoric and sentiments of this particular poem, unlike those of 'Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries', anticipate and wholly chime with those promoted by Osborn and Adcock. These lads are in some ways perfectly unremarkable country boys out for a good time; but they are also 'stalwart', 'brave', 'handsome of heart' and 'will die in their glory and never be old', displaying the kind of qualities that in countless obituaries were attributed to those killed in action. This is what people wanted to

remember and believe about those they had lost, beliefs they very naturally found both sustaining and healing. A line that was taken particularly to heart contains one of Housman's most striking and beautiful images: 'They carry back bright to the coiner the mintage of man.' Housman often spent a great deal of time revising his poetry and the image he originally employed in this line was very different, one of darkness rather than light: 'They carry unspoilt into darkness the honour of man'. His second thought was not an improvement: 'They carry unspoilt into safety the honour of man' seems even more loftily vague – and it wasn't until his third attempt that he got it absolutely and so memorably right. That rightness struck Cynthia Asquith. A daughter-in-law of the Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, she had suffered dreadful losses in the war among the young men in her circle: alongside many friends, those killed included her eldest and youngest brothers, three first cousins, and a brother-in-law. In a letter of condolence to the mother of Julian Grenfell, she reached for Housman: 'it must be wonderful to think of [Julian] and all his glamour as so utterly unassailable,' she wrote, '– to know that he "carries back bright to the Coiner the mintage of man"' and yet to feel that he had already found time to fulfil himself as the perfect Happy Warrior.' The full line was later inscribed on the gravestone of her brother Yvo, who was killed in action shortly after his nineteenth birthday, having spent only five weeks at the front. Appropriately enough the line was also used as the epigraph to a *History of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry in the Great War* - which was the regiment Housman had commemorated in '1887', the very first poem of *A Shropshire Lad*.

It perhaps seems odd that Housman should have sent his grieving sister 'Illic Jacet', a poem that seems not to perform the role he outlined in the accompanying letter, when he had this other near-perfect poem to hand, a poem that really does harmonize the sadness of the universe and is more obviously sustaining and healing. I suspect he may have thought that it would be less personal to send a poem that had appeared in a much reprinted volume that was, as they say, available in all good bookshops. In contrast, 'Illic Jacet' had appeared only once, fifteen years earlier and in a magazine. It was also a poem about the fate of an individual soldier rather than 'lads in their hundreds', and it linked Clement's own war and death with those of his Uncle Herbert. It was, however, another of Housman's poems that Clement himself apparently found sustaining. 'Her strong enchantments failing' was

written at the same time as the poems of *A Shropshire Lad*, and originally intended for that volume, but for some reason Housman withdrew it at proof stage, and it would eventually be published as the poem that immediately preceded 'Illic Jacet' in *Last Poems*. Before that, it too had been published in the memorial supplement to Clement's school magazine, in a variant form and under the title 'The Conflict'. In its final form it runs:

Her strong enchantments failing,  
Her towers of fear in wreck,  
Her limbecks dried of poisons  
And the knife at her neck,

The Queen of air and darkness  
Begins to shrill and cry,  
'O young man, O my slayer,  
To-morrow you shall die.'

O Queen of air and darkness,  
I think 'tis truth you say,  
And I shall die tomorrow;  
But you will die to-day.

Clement had copied this poem into an autograph book before he set off for the front, and because it had not at that point been published, we must assume that Housman had shown it to his nephew. Asked in 1933 to explain the meaning of the poem, Housman replied that 'The queen of air and darkness comes from a line of Coventry Patmore's, "the powers of darkness and the air", which in its turn is a reference to "the prince of the power of the air" in Ephesians II 2; and the meaning is Evil.' It has been argued that the poem's grim message is that in order to kill the evil within, you have to kill yourself; but Housman would hardly have given the poem to his nephew if that were its *only* meaning. We are told that Clement himself 'believed the poem to depict the vanquishment of cowardice', and this would undoubtedly make sense if, as his mother claimed, he expected to be killed in the war. We don't know whether Clement, like so many of his generation, took a copy of *A Shropshire Lad* to war; but it is surely significant

that Housman's personal gift to his nephew was a single, sustaining poem that brought comfort to one young soldier as, 'Dear to friends and food for powder', he marched off to the trenches.



## Laurence Housman and the Lord Chamberlain

*Elizabeth Oakley*

The huge success of the recent National Theatre production of the *The Audience* shows how far stage censorship has changed from the days, within living memory, when the Lord Chamberlain's office could refuse a stage licence for plays in which British royal characters featured. The experience of Laurence Housman is an example of the frustration that such censorship could cause.

The Lord Chamberlain was, and still is, responsible for the running of the monarch's household – dealing with such social and ceremonial occasions as the state opening of parliament and the reception of foreign dignitaries – and the puzzle of how he came to control stage licences has its origins in the Tudor period. With the proliferation of professional companies of actors and theatres in London under Queen Elizabeth I, the authorities felt it more necessary than ever to scrutinize plays offered for both court and public performance to root out seditious material. The Master of the Revels, who organized court entertainments and answered to the Lord Chamberlain, eventually took over this role which widened to a national control of stage performance. Flouting of the Master of the Revels' instructions could result in severe penalty as Edmund Tilney's annotations to the manuscript of the multi-authored draft of *Sir Thomas More* attest:

Leave out the insurrection wholly, and begin with Sir Thomas More at the Mayor's session, with a report afterwards of his good service done being sheriff of London upon a mutiny against the Lombards – only by short report, and not otherwise – **at your own perils.**

Even though the Civil War in the 1640s closed the public theatres for some years, the Lord Chamberlain's office resumed control over stage licences at the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 and the system continued until as late as 1968. The 1737 *Licensing Act* formalized the Lord Chamberlain's role and he had power to ban, without the need for

justification, any plays considered subversive. Though the revised 1843 *Theatres Act* reduced his scope to enforce a veto, the Lord Chamberlain remained as an official safeguard over public morals and an arbiter of good taste. He could refuse a licence when he judged it ‘fitting for the preservation of good manners, decorum or the public peace to do so’. Eventually the *Theatres Act* was repealed in 1968 so that ‘none of the powers which were exercisable... by the Lord Chamberlain of her Majesty’s household’ would be henceforth ‘exercisable by or on behalf of her Majesty by virtue of Her royal prerogative’.

Therefore, the granting of performing licences under the *Theatres Act* was subject to frequently inconsistent and shifting criteria. As can be imagined, the depiction of British royalty on stage was a sensitive subject for the Lord Chamberlain who represented and therefore protected the monarchy. So it is not surprising that plays in which British royalty was negatively portrayed could run into problems and Laurence Housman, whose playwriting career spanned the first half of the twentieth century, made no secret of his shabby treatment by the Lord Chamberlain for impeding his playwriting career: his two plays in which British Queens were the leading characters were refused a licence, although it was an irony that Laurence was allowed to publish them. The plays could also be performed ‘privately’ on occasions if money was not taken from the audience, though this meant that a professional playwright such as Laurence would lose out financially.

The first of the two plays which did not find favour was *Pains and Penalties: A Defence of Queen Caroline*, a drama about the injustices suffered by the wife of George IV and written in support of the Women’s Suffrage Movement, a campaign which Laurence ardently supported. The title refers to a ‘Bill of Pains and Penalties’ which, in the event of Queen Caroline’s not consenting to live permanently in exile abroad after the accession of her husband George IV, would come before parliament to effect a divorce on humiliating terms for the Queen. In 1911 both theatre and professional cast were ready for *Pains and Penalties* but, with no explanation, the Lord Chamberlain refused a licence. Though Laurence queried the decision, no answer was forthcoming for nine years. Since in Laurence’s play Queen Caroline is presented as a victim of reactionary male prejudice and double standards both by the monarchy and by parliament, it is not difficult to see why the Lord Chamberlain would be alarmed at allowing *Pains and*

*Penalties* on stage. By 1911 the Suffrage campaign was entering a more violent, militant phase as women became desperate for their demands to be met and the government's attempts to quash the movement became harsher in return. In *Pains and Penalties* much is made of the unfair treatment of Queen Caroline by her husband and British law which had already enforced her total separation from her daughter Princess Charlotte. The British royal family represented by George IV's brothers are obstructive and boorish, their parts consisting of muttered oaths and insults. In the interests of 'public peace' the Lord Chamberlain would have no doubt felt nervous of the play's impact in performance

In his Preface to a reprint of *Pains and Penalties* in 1937 Laurence gives the answer he eventually received years later from the Lord Chamberlain which revealed the 'revolting phrases' in the play that had caused offence:

When this play was written and published in 1911, it was banned by the Lord Chamberlain; and, in spite of my repeated request, no offending passage was indicated... Nine years later, when I renewed my application, the stones of stumbling were tardily revealed to me. They were – the two words 'committed adultery', and the sentence 'Heirs male of the last generation have not proved a conspicuous success'... and so long as two words (which congregations hear said in church every Sunday in the year) are not said upon the stage, and so long as the moral value to the Nation of the sons of King George III remains unquestioned, my play will be allowed performance.

Thus after the wanton damage done to my property by an unexplained act of censorship, twenty-five years ago, the dramatic rights of this play have been restored to me – without compensation...

The second of Laurence's two 'royal' plays took Queen Victoria as subject. In 1930 he published *Palace Plays* in five scenes, which included 'The Revolting Daughter' that showed the eighteen-year old Victoria grappling with the demands of her new role, releasing herself from the grip

of her dominating mother and choosing a husband for herself. He went on to write a series of scenes based on her life which, anticipating that they would be rejected by the Lord Chamberlain, he published together as *Victoria Regina* in 1934. Professional performance for such material was still out of the question if only because, as Laurence wrote in his Preface: 'the Censor would probably make objection – not because of obscene passages, but because of its subject. Queen Victoria is still too sacred a character to be allowed on the stage... The rising tide of Nationalism required a tutelary deity to crown its edifice.' However, it seems that the official reason Laurence was given by the Lord Chamberlain for refusing a licence to *Victoria Regina* was that three of Victoria's children (Duke of Connaught, Princess Beatrice and Princess Louise) were still alive.

Though Queen Victoria is a very different protagonist from Queen Caroline both plays are nevertheless studies of women fighting for independence and recognition in a man's world. Despite his uncomplimentary comments on Victoria as a queen who reigned too long and whose 'sedentary mind' exerted an inhibiting power over reform and progress, Laurence nevertheless admired her spirit and makes the following unexpected connection with the Women's Suffrage campaign that though Queen Victoria herself was opposed to votes for women it was 'in her own escape from leading-strings the movement had begun'.

Laurence shows on stage a different Victoria, at home, in a series of scenes of 'side events' that reveal her character at different phases of her life: we see her receiving Lord Melbourne, dismissing her mother on accession to the throne, proposing marriage to Prince Albert, mourning her husband's death, serenely chatting to John Brown, collapsing after the public duties of her Diamond Jubilee. This intimate, frank portrayal of the Queen would hardly have appealed to the Lord Chamberlain but the public, flocking to the short run of 'private' performances at The Gate Theatre in 1935 with Pamela Stanley as Victoria, loved it and American producers saw the potential. So, by 1935 *Victoria Regina* had become a smash Broadway hit, with the American Helen Hayes as leading lady. Laurence was naturally delighted and Alfred urged him not to 'squander' the royalties as he had the proceeds of his widely popular novel *An Englishwoman's Love-Letters* in 1900.

In January 1936 George V died and Edward VIII began his short-

lived reign. The new king was a moderniser, impatient of court traditions and practices inherited from previous generations, who soon began to make sweeping changes to his staff and court procedures. The Lord Chamberlain, Lord Cromer, survived the cull but wryly commented ‘war was in effect declared against the old gang’ (Ziegler, p. 258). Edward VIII’s relationship with the American Wallis Simpson was becoming a constitutional issue by 1936 and a battle between the British establishment and the king became inevitable. Strangely, one of the last decrees of the king before abdicating on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1936 was to allow plays about Victoria’s life to be performed on the British stage. Various factors may have contributed to Edward’s decision, including Wallis Simpson’s alleged enthusiasm for the Broadway production and Queen Mary’s apparent enjoyment of the published version. However, as Edward prepared to leave the royal stage himself – a move which rocked the stability of the country at a time when Hitler’s ascendancy posed the threat of war – he determined that his great-grandmother, carrying with her the glories of the British Empire, could appear on the public stage to remind the nation of her long and stable reign. Laurence describes in *The Unexpected Years* how the King’s intervention reached him:

On December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1936... a friend at whose house I was staying that day, was called to the telephone to receive the following news: ‘The King has told the Lord Chamberlain he is to license *Victoria Regina*, and there is a Constitutional Crisis.

On the same day, 3<sup>rd</sup> December, the following announcement was made in *The Times* confirming the king’s decree and in addition mentioning *Victoria Regina*, thus implying that the decree had been prompted by the existence of Laurence’s play.

The Lord Chamberlain is authorized to announce that, by permission the King, plays concerning Queen Victoria can now be considered for production after June 20, 1937, subject to the usual regulations for the licensing of stage plays. This date has been selected as being the centenary of Queen Victoria’s accession to the throne.

A selection from the plays written by Mr. Laurence Housman under the general title of *Victoria Regina* was shown privately at the Gate Theatre about a year ago and has since been performed with success in New York.

As if this notice were not gratifying enough to Laurence, on 4<sup>th</sup> December *The Times* reported even more good news: the British Board of Film Censors had followed suit in lifting the ban on stage representations of Victoria and confidently promised that ‘one of the first films to take advantage of this licence will be *Victoria the Great*, which Mr. Herbert Wilcox will produce next year.’ The film, based on *Victoria Regina* though scripted by Miles Malleston, duly appeared in 1937 starring the glamorous Anna Neagle. Though shot in black and white, the final sequence of the Diamond Jubilee burst into full colour, thus emphasizing the pomp and pageantry of the occasion. The film had such success that Wilcox brought out a lavish technicolour sequel, *Sixty Glorious Years*, in 1938, which did even more to boost national pride.

Despite Edward VIII’s decree, stage censorship continued to exist and there were still doubts that *Victoria Regina* would open at The Lyric on 21<sup>st</sup> June 1937 with Pamela Stanley back in the main role. Katherine Lyon Mix in her unpublished biography of Laurence, *The Last Victorian*, gives a lively account of a last-minute hitch just before the opening night: it seems that Lord Cromer insisted on attending the dress rehearsal and objected to unflattering references to George III. Fortunately Lord Cromer’s wife who had accompanied him to the theatre persuaded him to overcome his reservations and the production went ahead. On the first night Laurence, feeling specially favoured by the king, wanted to thank Edward (now Duke of Windsor) at the curtain call but, according to Lyon Mix, this was not allowed and so Laurence contented himself with a fervent ‘At last! At last!’.

What was it that made *Victoria Regina* so popular? Even Alfred Housman, not always approving of his brother’s work, found the dialogue clever and amusing, but here was more than light entertainment. In his Preface to *Victoria Regina* Laurence explained that his intention was to present Victoria’s reign in historical perspective as ‘a whole set of cherished notions which, in the ’60s and ’70s [the years in which Laurence himself was growing up] were ‘already moribund’ and by the 1930s ‘finally dead and

disposed of'. However, contemporary events gave to his play an unintended significance: Laurence had unwittingly written a play that boosted patriotic feeling and admiration for Victoria at a time of present national crisis.

The reviews of *Victoria Regina* praised its lively, dramatic qualities but were critical of its structure. Where were the acts and plot development? Out of so many short, free-standing scenes, what exactly was the *play*? Laurence defended himself by calling *Victoria Regina* a 'dramatic biography', claiming that if all the scenes were performed it would take three days and therefore selection was necessary for one evening's performance. *Victoria Regina*, he said, was a play not of plot but 'of character' which did not conform to the standard three or four acts in vogue at the time. From our standpoint in the twenty-first century we can see that Laurence's approach was highly original for the 1930s and that his short scenes were well suited to radio and television. In the printed version of *Victoria* – guessing that there was probably little chance of a stage production – Laurence provides elaborate descriptions for his readers of décor and costumes consistent with the Victorian period he knew at first hand. There is even one scene ('Morning Glory') in which Prince Albert enters in his dressing gown, 'draws on his pantaloons' and begins his morning shave to Victoria's wonderment: tricky to stage but perfect for television.

Another aspect of *Victoria Regina* which would have caused a frisson at the time for its audiences was the sense of secrets being revealed about Victoria and Albert's relationship and their private lives. The most daring of Laurence's assertions about the couple concerns Albert's illegitimacy. It seems that around the time of their marriage there were rumours at the British court that Albert's true father was the court chamberlain whom his mother married after her divorce when Albert was five years old. The lack of physical or temperamental resemblance to his elder brother Ernest helped the credibility of this story. Laurence presents the illegitimacy as fact, known by Albert himself and confessed as a shameful stigma to Victoria during her proposal scene with the mournful expectation she will reject him. Instead, Albert's shocking news adds dramatic impact and piquancy as Victoria stoutly dismisses this as an obstacle to their union. In another Preface to some of the Victoria playlets (published as *The Queen's Progress*) Laurence concedes that 'no documents have been published on either side of the case' but 'has reason to believe they exist'. However, no

such documentary evidence has so far materialised.

*Victoria Regina* proved to be Laurence's most successful play and although Laurence did not repeat his lavish Broadway success with *Victoria Regina* after the war, a glance through the BBC archives of *The Radio Times* shows that it retained its popularity enough for parts of it to be broadcast several times through the 1940s and '50s. Laurence must have been especially pleased that the *Third Programme* chose to air a selection of scenes to celebrate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953.

As a pioneer so often in the forefront of campaigns to challenge prejudice and censorship, Laurence would surely have been delighted to see the National Theatre production of *The Audience* in which the leading character on stage is a British monarch – and this time a reigning monarch – who holds her audience captivated in a series of short and intimate scenes reminiscent of *Victoria Regina*. Just as pleasing – for Laurence loved America – would have been the knowledge that *The Audience* later became a Broadway hit as his own *Victoria Regina* had been in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup>

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## A. E. Housman's Early Biographers

*Martin Blocksidge*

*'Alfred lies dead with his brother's knife in his side'*

### I

A.E. Housman was neither the first nor the last author to rebuff those who sought biographical information from him. Nevertheless, he was well aware of the fact that posterity would take a keen interest in him, and may even have had some intuition of the form which that interest would take. His major compromise 'for the sake of posterity'<sup>1</sup> was to provide answers to a questionnaire submitted to him in 1933 by the young French scholar, Maurice Pollet. Although Grant Richards, through whom Pollet made his approach, had warned him that cooperation from Housman was highly unlikely,<sup>2</sup> Housman was acquiescent in meeting Pollet's requests, and the comments which he subsequently made, though guarded, were, as far as they went, definitive, and have remained of significance to Housman's biographers ever since.<sup>3</sup>

What might well have surprised Housman, however, was the speed with which, after his death, he was to become a subject of biographical interest. Although none of the first generation of writers about Housman was writing a full and systematic biography – indeed they were prone to point out their inadequacy for this task – the swiftness with which their work got into print now seems remarkable. By the end of 1936 (Housman had died on 30 April), A.S.F. Gow's *A. E. Housman A Sketch* and Katharine Symons' (edited) *Alfred Edward Housman Recollections* had both appeared. Also, during the summer and autumn of 1936 Laurence Housman was assembling the collection of hitherto unpublished work which would become *More Poems* and *Additional Poems*, as well as writing his *A.E.H... A Personal Memoir*

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1. *The Letters of A. E. Housman*, ed. A. Burnett, II.330.

2. Grant Richards: *Housman 1897-1936* (1941) 267.

3. *Letters*, II.327-30.

which appeared in 1937, hard upon the heels of his own autobiography *The Unexpected Years*. This autobiography not only contained much material relating to Alfred Housman, but its narrative actually concluded with his death. Subsequently there was a slight hiatus before the appearance of Percy Withers' *A Buried Life Personal Recollections of A. E. Housman* in the summer of 1940. This arrived just in time to be read by Grant Richards as he put the finishing touches to his own *Housman 1897-1936* which came out in 1941, and which also contained further material from Katharine Symons (Housman's sister) in the form of a preface. It will be the purpose of this article firstly to show how Housman's early 'biographers' tended to create a Housman after their own image, and secondly to demonstrate how, despite some serious contentions, a complicity developed between them which, among other things, involved the concealment of perhaps the most important aspect of Housman's life and nature.

As far back as 1923, Housman had had a tense interview with the author and journalist Douglas Goldring who, having been offered £100 by a publisher to write his biography, duly presented himself in Housman's college rooms in Cambridge, only to be sent packing in no uncertain terms.<sup>4</sup> Eight years later, Cyril Clemens, cousin of Mark Twain and Founder of the International Mark Twain Society, was treated less abruptly though no more cooperatively when he too broached the subject of a biography. Housman and Clemens had been in correspondence since 1927, and, when Clemens was in Cambridge in the summer of 1930, Housman extended a cordial invitation to him to dine at Trinity College. Clemens was much impressed by the occasion and left an account of the evening which he twice published, firstly under the title 'Housman as a Conversationalist' in 1936<sup>5</sup> and secondly (with minor alterations) as 'An Evening with A. E. Housman' the following year.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that the first of these versions was actually subtitled: 'A Chapter from C. Clemens' forthcoming biography "Alfred Edward Housman".' Despite his gracious entertainment of Clemens, however, Housman clearly had no great regard for his abilities, describing him subsequently as 'a very vacuous young man... [who] stayed

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4. *Housman Society Journal*, Vol 16, 1990, pp. 50-3.

5. *Mark Twain Quarterly*, Housman Memorial Number, 1.2 (1936) 9, 22.

6. International Mark Twain Society, Historical Series, No. 6 (1937) Webster Groves, MO. (This piece was reprinted in *HSJ* 41[2015] 104-12.)

here for some time trying to improve his mind.’<sup>7</sup> When Clemens submitted an early draft of ‘Housman as Conversationalist’ to Housman himself, he was duly (and patronisingly) informed by Housman that he had

corrected or marked the most inaccurate of your inaccuracies. I do not know why Americans are so fond of writing – and apparently of reading – about personal matters; but it seems to me a national characteristic, and it makes me unwilling to meet them, though they are always so kindly and friendly.<sup>8</sup>

Housman, however, had already informed Clemens *a propos* the matter of a biography, that he was:

naturally flattered that you should entertain the idea of writing a biography of me, but neither you nor anyone else could possibly write one, and I certainly would give no assistance. I have sometimes thought of depositing in the British Museum a few pages to be published 50 years after my death. At present *Who’s Who* gives all the external facts.<sup>9</sup>

Although Housman’s putative ‘few pages’ were mentioned by him more than once, there is no evidence that they were ever written.

Clemens, however, was nothing if not persistent. Apart from superintending a dedicated Housman Memorial number of the *Mark Twain Quarterly*, he also approached both Laurence Housman and Katharine Symons (henceforth Kate) for the kind of assistance that the writer of an authorised biography might request and expect, and both Laurence and Kate were, at the outset, prepared to co-operate. Unfortunately, as time went by, they became much less sympathetic. Clemens’ inaccuracies were so abundant and gross that Laurence was forced to inform him that he was

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7. *Letters*, II.227-8.

8. *Letters*, II.284.

9. *Letters*, II.262.

not 'competent to do what he has undertaken',<sup>10</sup> and consequently withdrew his offer of assistance. Kate found the Clemens' work 'a deplorable hash'<sup>11</sup> and was also furious at his filching material from her own *Recollections*, as well as from Laurence's *A.E.H.* By the end of 1937, Clemens had, to Laurence, simply become a 'damned nuisance'<sup>12</sup>.

The objections of Kate and Laurence to Clemens' work were entirely justified. Six chapters of it have survived (though in fragmentary form)<sup>13</sup> and an examination of them reveals not only frequent appropriations of the kind that Kate had censured, but also a reliance on extensive quotation from other published sources and some pastiche. Indeed, one chapter ('Housman and Fellow Authors') mainly consists of words written by other people, not always acknowledged. The chapter which deals with Housman at Oxford shows Clemens woefully out of his depth, even to the extent of identifying Housman's 'greatest friend' at Oxford as Alfred Pollard rather than Moses Jackson (of whose existence he seemed unaware). The surviving typescripts of this and other chapters contain Kate's comments, which are uniformly frosty, and had clearly not been made in any constructive spirit. In a chapter entitled 'Death', she particularly took issue with Clemens' treatment of Housman's final hours, a matter which (as will be seen) came to possess an almost symbolic importance to her.

The united front which Laurence and Kate put up over the Clemens chapters might thus seem to indicate that they were of one mind and working in concert. If anything, however, the opposite was true. From the very time of Alfred's death, differences had begun to emerge between the siblings, beginning with a disagreement about how the service for the interment of Alfred's ashes at Ludlow should be conducted. Laurence had been scrupulous in undertaking the preparatory work for this ceremony, but was disappointed that, as a result of Kate's interference, the service was turned into something 'rather too Christian' for his (and by implication,

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10. Trinity College Cambridge Add Ms 71-2001(1).

11. Trinity Add Ms 71-60(2).

12. Trinity Add Ms 71-14(1).

13. 'A.E. Housman's Schooldays', University of Texas, Austin, Humanities research Center, Ms (Armstrong, TIF), Misc; 'Oxford', and 'Death', Columbia University, Housman Collection, Box 2; 'Housman and Fellow Authors', Cyril Clemens Papers, Box 1, Syracuse University Library; 'Housman at Cambridge', *Dalhousie Review* 22.3 (1942) 321-5.

Alfred's) taste.<sup>14</sup>

It is therefore unsurprising that before long the differences between Laurence and Kate also began to take a literary form. Although Kate did not object to Laurence's inclusion of some of the more personally revealing of Housman's posthumous poems in *More Poems*, he feared that she might have done, as she was, in his words, 'austere and to some extent Victorian'.<sup>15</sup> Kate did, however, register considerable disapproval of Laurence's *A.E.H.* With remarkably little sisterly charity she told A.S.F. Gow that she was 'never pleased with [Laurence's] writings, they really seem to me to be so superficial.'<sup>16</sup> After its appearance she dismissed *A.E.H.* as 'spatchcocked stuff'<sup>17</sup>, and in particular she returned to her fixation with Housman's death. Laurence had repeated the story, originally told by Housman's doctor, R.S. Woods, that his patient's last recorded words had been an irreverent response to a *risqué* joke which Woods had just told him.<sup>18</sup> Kate refused to countenance this, and her irritation about it simmered for some months. She first raised her objections with Gow late in 1936:

The whole communication as from a dying man, should have been kept sacred... or only passed on to the nearest relative in confidence. No doctor could well have anticipated that such a conversation would have been published, and published in conjunction with other private conversations fixing blasphemy and atheism, openly, on the dead man in a way that would not fail to pain any Christian friends or relations who cared for him. I have had pained letters from several people, and my feeling is that Alfred lies dead with his brother's knife in his side... Is Dr. Woods seething with indignation and abashment that this confidence has been published?<sup>19</sup>

By the following September, Kate's fury at this apparent breach of medical

14. Trinity AddMs 71-111.

15. Trinity AddMs 71-139.

16. Trinity AddMs 71-75.

17. Trinity AddMs 71-32.

18. M. Blocksidge, *A. E. Housman A Single Life* (2016) 249.

19. Trinity AddMs 71-72.

ethics had conveniently become overtaken by the belief that, as a result of her own investigations, Laurence's version of the story was incorrect anyway.<sup>20</sup>

Kate's concern over this particular issue is contrasted by the fact that neither Gow (with whom she had twice discussed it) nor Dr Woods himself felt that there was any ethical problem involved. Indeed, Woods was perfectly happy to retell the story, in one form or another, for the rest of his life. Kate's fury was primarily the result of her frustration at a matter over which she had been unable to exercise control. It was the earliest manifestation of her desire to create and maintain an image of Housman which would, among other things, render him a kind of honorary Christian of a sort acceptable to those who shared her 'austere' and 'Victorian' attitudes (attitudes which were not, despite outward appearances, Alfred Housman's own). Although her reaction to this particular *trahison* on Laurence's part seems immoderate and shrill, it was indicative of much that was to come.

Laurence's having thus placed his 'knife in his dead brother's side' meant that, like Cyril Clemens, he was in Kate's eyes, not to be trusted as a custodian of Alfred's memory. For a more congenial memorial to him Kate had to look elsewhere.

A.S.F. (Andrew) Gow was, like Housman, a classical fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. Especially in his later life he acquired the reputation of being difficult and acerbic in a way which seemed almost to parody Housman's. Nevertheless, he had earned the genuine and long-lasting gratitude of both Kate and Laurence for the kindness which he had shown Housman during the last weeks of his life. When Housman had eventually proved incapable of mounting the stairs to his rooms in Whewell's Court, it was Gow who had masterminded the removal of Housman's personal effects (including a very large library) to new ground-floor quarters. Thereafter he had kept a sympathetic eye on Housman, visiting him daily in hospital until the time of his death.

Gow's ministrations on Housman's behalf did not finish there, however, and he quickly became the repository of confidences from both Laurence and Kate, the handling of which, given their scarcely concealed mutual antipathy, must on occasion have required some tact. Kate approved of Gow's *Sketch* when it appeared in the autumn of 1936, and wrote

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20. Trinity AddMs 71-28.

appreciatively to him, that she had found his treatment of Housman

very sympathetic... everything that you had written came forcibly to me as an impression of the Cambridge Alfred whom I had never seen in his varsity-setting. I drank in gratefully all you said towards the end about the tenderer inner-man that he possessed.<sup>21</sup>

Even so, Kate still wanted the last word, and subsequently sent Gow a further 'ms of reminiscences'. In her covering letter Kate expressed her faith in Gow as

an impersonal repository, with whom my statement can rest without fear of injudicious publication of the more intimate details. No one else has shown such faithful care for my brother and his "remains", and all you have done makes it seem right that you should know anything concerning him that I can tell you.<sup>22</sup>

Gow's presence on the side of the angels was, of course, the result of his having written nothing which offended Kate. The careful and controlled tone of the *Sketch* certainly meant that there was scarcely anything in it which could be seen as 'injudicious', and the whole was generally in keeping with that tact which Gow had already shown in dealing with the Housman siblings. It is also worth noting that the focus of Gow's book is only partially biographical. Its full title is *A.E. Housman A Sketch Together With A List Of His Writings And Indexes To His Classical Papers*. Gow's preface seems to suggest that he saw the compiling of the list and indexes as the book's main purpose: the 'Sketch' runs to 54 pages, whilst the list and indexes run to 77. Gow is emphatic about the impossibility of writing a full biography of Housman and seems almost apologetic when he suggests that 'the scholars for whom the lists and indexes are intended might welcome a brief outline of his life and some account of his scholarship'.<sup>23</sup> Despite

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21. Trinity AddMs 71-97.

22. Trinity AddMs 71-64.

23. A.S.F. Gow: *A. E. Housman A Sketch...* (2016) viii.

the tentativeness of his stated aims, however, Gow had acted in the spirit of the genuine biographer, and was not content (as others would be) to rely too exclusively on recollection and anecdote. He consulted those who had known or worked with Housman in Oxford and at University College, London, and had even taken the trouble to contact at least one of Housman's colleagues from the Patent Office.

One of the most important and enduring features of Gow's *Sketch* is his description of Housman's social manner as it manifested itself during his years in Cambridge. Although all of Housman's early biographers dealt in their own way with this aspect of Housman (as indeed did A.C. Benson, his *Times* obituarist), Gow's treatment of it is perhaps the most neatly analytical. His own nature rendered Gow particularly well attuned to Housman's peculiar mixture of aloofness and kindness. He was frank enough about Housman's apparent unsociability, confessing that he could prove 'exhausting' as a dining companion, and that 'to the end of his life he remained, in ordinary society, a little difficult by reason of his silence.'<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, Gow acknowledged Housman's occasional capacity, in the right company, to unwind, and prove himself 'as vivacious as any member of the party... an admirable raconteur... [who] would greet the contributions of others with bursts of silvery laughter which retained to the end of his life something boyish and infectious.'<sup>25</sup> As with all of Housman's early biographers, Gow remained of the opinion that, despite outward appearances, Housman possessed a fundamental kindness and tolerance of others.

Unusually, Gow saw no incongruity between Housman the scholar and Housman the poet. Although it perhaps takes some straining to find, as Gow did, that in the 'invectives against the follies and perversities of his fellow-scholars it is not difficult to hear the voice of the Shropshire Lad turned critic'<sup>26</sup>, it is refreshing nonetheless that Gow did not find Housman 'a divided man' in the way that subsequent commentators have often been prone to do. In general, Gow chose to write about those aspects of Housman's life which were easily demonstrable, but it is clear that he knew more about this life than might simply have been gleaned from High Table

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24. *Ibid.*, 48.

25. *Ibid.*, 50.

26. *Ibid.*, 34.



conversation. Although Gow is by far the most circumspect of Housman's early biographers, he still permitted himself some limited speculation about Housman's personal life.

It comes as some surprise, for example, to discover that Gow knew about Housman's friendship with Moses Jackson, and that he was able to document the relationship's history in some detail, mentioning Jackson's work in the Patent Office, his sharing of lodgings with Housman in London, his emigration to India, and Housman's dedication of Book One of his edition of Manilius to him; not to mention Jackson's (reputedly) 'unconcealed contempt'<sup>27</sup> for literature. Gow's scrupulousness caused him to stop short of informing his readers in so many words of the real significance of Jackson in Housman's life, but everything which he wrote about Jackson is consistent with one who knew (or had perceived) the truth about it. What Gow presented as mildly speculative was factually entirely accurate. He wrote, for example, that *A Shropshire Lad* and

some of the poems published after [Housman's] death spoke of friendship in terms which evidently came from the heart; and, if more proof were needed, the warmth of the dedication of his Manilius was unambiguous as to the warmth of the friendship between Housman and Jackson.<sup>28</sup>

Gow subsequently (and revealingly) concluded that Housman's 'desire for friendship had been overborne by fear of what friendship might hold in store'.<sup>29</sup>

The slightly oracular nature of this last comment, coupled with Gow's insistence that he was writing primarily about a colleague, enabled him to keep within the bounds of what Kate viewed as propriety. The fact that Kate had praised Gow for his avoidance of the 'injudicious publication of the more intimate details' of her brother's life suggests the existence of some kind of tacit agreement between them about what these details were, and about how, in consequence, they should be treated.

Of Housman's early biographers, Gow, Withers and Richards all

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27. Ibid., 9.

28. Ibid., 49.

29. Ibid., 52.

produced books of various sorts. It was perhaps inevitable that Kate's contributions would be of a more fragmentary nature, though she did contemplate a book which she provisionally titled *A Housman Patchwork*, for which she made some notes,<sup>30</sup> but which remained incomplete at the time of her death in November 1945. Nevertheless, she continued to see herself as the ultimate 'owner' of her brother's after-life, and her possessiveness of it certainly did not diminish with the years.

*Alfred Housman Recollections* is actually a series of essays about Housman which Kate edited, and to which she contributed a chapter. Her fellow contributors were A. W. Pollard, Laurence Housman, R. W. Chambers, W. P. Ker, Gow, and John Sparrow. Kate's own chapter dealt with Housman's boyhood and thus covered similar ground to that which Laurence would cover in his *The Unexpected Years* and *A.E.H.*, though Kate allowed herself to extend Housman's boyhood as far as his years in London. Kate represented the young Alfred Housman as an altogether more serious character than Laurence did. Laurence's treatment of the Housman family's life at Perry Hall and then at Fockbury House has tended to become the definitive one, perhaps because Laurence looked back on this period with a more obvious warmth and joy than Kate did. Kate mainly treated of the Housman family life only after the move to Fockbury, and, though she was clear enough about the fun which the children often had together (usually under Alfred's leadership), she also noted that although:

Our gatherings were generally hilarious; yet in looking back, it is in these doings that we can now see that [Alfred] had an emotional nature, subject to gloom that spread in spite of his efforts to subdue it.<sup>31</sup>

Kate's Alfred was an adult before his time, sometimes disconcertingly taciturn, and already adopting in adolescence the habits which characterised his later years: 'Punctuality, industry, fixed routine, daily walking, love of flowers and trees, woods and hills.'<sup>32</sup> At the same time, though, Kate (as she was always to do) was keen to highlight Housman's

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30. J. Pugh: *Bromsgrove and the Housmans* (1974) Appendix E, lxiii.

31. K. Symons (ed.), *Alfred Edward Housman Recollections* (1936) 17.

32. *Ibid.*, 29

sharp and often disconcerting sense of humour. She quoted at some length from his nonsense poems, and rightly noted that '[h]e was quick to see humour in things about him, or to give grim things a humorous turn.'<sup>33</sup>

Kate's portrait of the young Alfred Housman explicitly owed something to hindsight, and she clearly wished to present her brother's boyhood in terms of a larger, more rounded portrait of his general character. In doing this, she made much of what Housman himself had called 'the great and real troubles of my early manhood'.<sup>34</sup> The difficult home circumstances resulting from their father's improvidence and exacerbated by his ill-health, Kate suggested, meant that Housman's 'path to easy happiness became blocked, and though this may have helped him to pass through Oxford... it was enough to cloud his life.' Likewise, his failure in 'Greats', she believed, 'permanently influenced his attitude towards the outside world.'<sup>35</sup> Using the (not very reliable) evidence of *A Shropshire Lad*, she also decided that Housman was unhappy when he lived in London, and floated an idea which would often, in one form or another, figure in subsequent discussions of Housman's poetry which, she believed,

pour[ed] from a fount that his discipline was apparently unable to control. We read in it deep-seated emotions demanding expression-the frequent repetition of a few themes showing the permanence of a source that refused to be suppressed... Poetry seems to have acted as safety valve to his mental sufferings.<sup>36</sup>

In presenting Housman's inner life in these terms, and seeing his poetry as essentially cathartic, Kate anticipated the kind of writing about Housman which would become more commonplace in the next generation, though her motives for so doing were very much her own. Where later writers (such as W. H. Auden, or George L. Watson, for example) tended to see Housman almost as some kind of pathological 'case', Kate had other purposes, being keen to assure her readers that she (uniquely) understood

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33. *Ibid.*, 23.

34. *Letters*, II.450.

35. Symons, 30.

36. *Ibid.*, 33.

her brother, whilst also using her own privileged knowledge to keep prurient eyes out of more sensitive areas. Kate's treatment of Housman was essentially defensive, and this goes some way to explaining why she was so critical of Laurence Housman's *A.E.H.* Laurence avoided offering a sustained or consistent character-study of his brother, favouring a treatment of his life which was essentially episodic and anecdotal, and therefore, in Kate's eyes at least, 'superficial'.

Although he was less assertive over the matter than Kate, Laurence Housman also had a very strong case for seeing himself as the real custodian of Alfred's memory and reputation. As Alfred's literary executor he had effectively been given this responsibility anyway, and he had in consequence been required to make practical decisions of a kind which Kate had not. Laurence himself was less involved in constructing the image of Alfred that he wanted than in deciding how to use the documentary evidence which had come into his sole possession. He had already been forced to agonise over which of Housman's posthumous poems it was appropriate to publish, knowing that some of them related to Housman's homosexuality, and in some cases directly to Moses Jackson. He had also, among Housman's papers, found the letter which the dying Jackson had sent Alfred, and which Housman had carefully preserved as 'Mo's last letter'. Additionally, Laurence had discovered some diaries of Housman's, relating to the years 1888-1891 whose contents chiefly concerned Moses Jackson, and which will be discussed further in due course.

Laurence Housman is an agreeable writer and the pleasantness of his tone in *A.E.H.* makes Kate's criticisms of him seem pusillanimous. Laurence noted that, for much of their adult lives, a slightly embarrassed distance had been kept between himself and Alfred, though the brothers became much closer in their later years.<sup>37</sup> This was evinced not only in the fact of Alfred's asking Laurence to become his literary executor, but in Alfred and Laurence's taking of two summer touring holidays together. It was Laurence's view that Housman mellowed in his later years,<sup>38</sup> and he specifically recalled Alfred's opening up to him in the summer of 1934, when he talked for the first time:

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37. L. Housman, *A.E.H.: Some Poems, Some Letters and A Personal Memoir* (1937) 95.

38. R. P. Graves, *A. E. Housman The Scholar Poet* (1979) 267.

both about our past family history and other matters personal to himself... it seemed that he wished me to know certain things that I had not known before. It was then that he talked about our mother for the first time that I can remember. Maintaining his reserve over certain related matters, he said, without my having asked, "More I shall not tell you".<sup>39</sup>

The *rapprochement* which, so late in Alfred's life, had taken place between him and Laurence perhaps goes some way to explain the ultimately sentimental nature of *A.E.H.* Kate's specific objection to Laurence's treatment of Housman's death has already been mentioned, and it must be confessed that it is difficult not to hear in his account the novelist's rather than the biographer's voice. Laurence imputed death-bed words to Housman that were most likely fabricated,<sup>40</sup> just as he quoted some possibly spurious words from Housman's bedmaker at Trinity College, and others:

"I loved your brother. When I first began to do for him, I used to be afraid to go into the room; but it was all right when I got to know him." The assistant-matron at the Nursing Home said much the same thing; many others whom he kept rigidly at arm's length, had a great affection for him.<sup>41</sup>

There is no reason to doubt the sympathetic intention of Laurence's memoir: he had his own reasons for wishing his brother's memory to be properly preserved. Even so, Laurence, in his turn, had to consider how to deal with the two aspects of Housman's character which had already engaged Gow, and which all the early biographers would in turn be forced to consider. These were the related questions of Housman's austere social manner and his apparent lack of any kind of private life. About the social manner, Laurence agreed with Gow that Housman was an often diffident talker but a good listener. On the question of Housman's private life, however, Laurence proved more defensive than Gow had been,

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39. *A. E. H.*..., 114

40. *Ibid.*, 121

41. *Ibid.*, 120.

complaining, for example, that '[s]ince my brother's death there has been a persistent attempt because of his reserve and reticence, to make him out a man of mystery'.<sup>42</sup> He dismissed this kind of reasoning out of hand, assuring his readers that it was nothing better than 'journalistic nonsense'. He consciously ridiculed those attempts which had been made (and would continue to be made) to find some kind of emotional history for Housman which would serve to 'explain' him. Laurence thus made an Aunt Sally of the 'journalistic mind' for having

endeavoured to construct a hidden romance which was non-existent, and [having suggested] that some "lost lady of old years" was the cause of the secluded and celibate life which he adopted in early manhood, and persisted in till the end. Against that I can only state my conviction that A.E.H. was a born bachelor; and that he chose the habit of life which best suited him.<sup>43</sup>

Laurence could dismiss easily enough the idea that there had been any kind of heterosexual romance in Alfred's life, and he could do so on entirely factual grounds. However, in his own way, he had ended up in drawing much the same veil over Alfred's emotional life as Gow had done. Whilst Gow may well have been in possession of more knowledge about Housman than he was prepared to reveal, there is no doubt at all that Laurence actually was. Laurence had been faced directly, as both editor and biographer, with the issue of what it was appropriate to reveal and what to conceal about his brother. Laurence had opted for concealment in *A. E. H.*, but his reasons for doing so were different from Kate's, and, as subsequent events would show, his evasiveness was also a consciously provisional one.

## II

To consider Percy Withers and Grant Richards is to consider two men whose friendship with Housman had been real and extensive, but who were less privileged in their knowledge of him than Laurence and Kate were.

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42. *Ibid.*, 94.

43. *Ibid.*, 13.

Although scarcely remembered as such today, both Withers and Richards were published authors with, between them, a solid literary output, and, whilst neither of them is at all a candidate for literary greatness, it is important to see their biographies of Housman in the context of their other work. Percy Withers (1867-1945) had originally trained as a doctor but, as the result of serious illness, he had ceased to practise, and thereafter essentially lived the life of a freelance writer. He had, at the age of 27 (two years before *A Shropshire Lad*) published a book of poems. Following his enforced retirement, he had spent several months travelling in Egypt, and had on his return written *Egypt of Yesterday and Today* (part guidebook, part history). In the years before the First World War he had lived in the Lake District where he built a cottage for himself and his family on the shores of Derwentwater. This in turn produced two books of a semi-autobiographical nature, *In a Cumberland Dale*, and *Friends in Solitude*. Both these books, among other things, featured Withers' recollections of often one-sided conversations with his laconic Lakeland neighbours. Withers generally found the Lakelanders tongue-tied and enigmatic in utterance, though he forgave them for this on the grounds that 'only the vain and flippant expose their goods in the sight of those who will display them'.<sup>44</sup>

These words could almost be used as a motto for Withers' book about Housman, whose own characteristic and often inexplicable silences became one of Withers' chief themes. In his unpublished autobiography, Withers remarked of himself that he found 'the making of conversation easy. In that state of blessedness, I can talk when I have nothing much to say.'<sup>45</sup> It was therefore almost bound to be the case that he would find the often taciturn Housman frustrating company, a fact to which *A Buried Life* bears repeated witness. Despite this, however, Withers' 'Personal Recollections' are in no sense hostile: although Housman could be difficult, demanding, and trying of his friends' patience, Withers insisted that, in the context of a generally sociable life, his friendship with Housman had been amongst his most valued.<sup>46</sup>

Withers' title explicitly identifies Housman as a man who appeared to

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44. P. Withers, *Friends in Solitude* (1923) 253.

45. Percy Withers Collection, Somerville College, Oxford, Box 16. Ms titled '1914-18', p.57.

46. Withers, *ibid.*, 62.

contain hidden and unplumbed depths. Early in his narrative Withers quoted his wife's words on first encountering Housman: 'That man has had a tragic love affair!'<sup>47</sup> a judgement which was, of course, entirely correct, though Withers himself did not choose to ponder the significance of it. Unlike the writers already discussed, Withers was generally happier to acknowledge the disconcerting nature of Housman's silences and angularities than to offer much by way of explanation for them. In consequence, Withers gives much the best sense of what it actually felt like to be in Housman's company. He noted the 'charming and ready smile... [which] had something of sadness in it, and how quickly the smile passed, and the face relapsed into sadness, as though that were its native element.'<sup>48</sup> Like others, Withers noted that Housman was a good listener, but also that he answered questions 'readily, and though... he would sometimes talk spontaneously and at length... it was questioning alone that positively ensured his talking.'<sup>49</sup> When Housman could be encouraged to talk, however, he was 'arresting':

His phrases were apt to their purpose like a burnished rapier, indeed he possessed others of the weapon's qualities – its keen point, its shapeliness, its rather sinister steel-gleam and steel forthrightness. There was nothing of rhetoric. The effectiveness of his talk lay in its fastidious precision'.<sup>50</sup>

Despite Withers' frequent frustration at Housman's silences, it is clear that he could coax him into conversation when he was in the mood, and *A Buried Life* is an important source of material about Housman's life and opinions. It is to Withers that Housman vouchsafed some unique details about the origin of *A Shropshire Lad*, for example. Withers also elicited from Housman his views about architecture, nature, the fine arts, and poetry; it was Withers who witnessed Housman's almost apoplectic reaction after he had listened to a recording of Vaughan Williams' song cycle *On Wenlock Edge*.

Even so, he maintained that, despite Housman's shows of

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47. P. Withers, *A.E. Housman A Buried Life* (1940) 14.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*, 23.

50. *Ibid.*, 24.



friendliness towards him, he never felt:

the smallest assurance that I had got an inch nearer to Housman himself... It was as though I had received every encouragement, found the door open, and a smiling welcome, and been left to conduct the interview on the doorstep.<sup>51</sup>

Invoking his book's *leitmotif*, Withers believed that 'Housman's first and last characteristic was inscrutability – a buried life that he determined to keep buried.' However, where Gow and Laurence had each in his own way, and for his own reasons, found himself speculating about Housman's 'buried' life (sometimes disingenuously so), Withers' refusal to do this seems innocent by comparison, especially in his tendency to turn Housman's elusiveness to good account where he could. He noted, for example, that, despite Housman's 'chiselled speech, his stern and rather obdurate physiognomy in repose, his sardonic quips, his biting satire, his easy resort to mockery and scoffing,' there also 'beat as warm and generous a heart, as willing for self-sacrifice... as I have ever known.'<sup>52</sup>

Rather than speculating or surmising, Withers waited for Housman to provide revelations himself. Towards the end of his book he described Housman's last visit to him in the summer of 1935, when he was already very ill. By this time, it is almost as if Withers was actually willing Housman to drop his guard, and he seems to have believed that he had managed to do so. Having been left very much to himself by Withers and his wife, Housman took up residence in Withers' sitting room, where, after several days:

with a surge of feeling that seemed on the very verge of tears, he spoke of the delicious quiet of the room... and what it had meant to him, and how grateful he felt for it... His words were few, and deeply impressive, yet the look on his face told even more than they.

Of this 'confession', significantly, Withers adds: 'It was just what I longed

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51. *Ibid.*, 25.

52. *Ibid.*, 76-7.

to hear.’<sup>53</sup>

Withers had by this time also been the recipient of other confidences. These related to Housman’s enduring friendship with his childhood nurse, Sophie Becker, and his friends the Wise sisters. On telling Withers about the death of Sophie, Housman’s ‘voice faltered, his whole frame seemed shaken, as he told the brief story,’ adding that now the Wise sisters were also dead ‘how comfortably he could meet death now his three friends were at peace’.<sup>54</sup>

Although Withers did not spare his readers details of Housman’s crotchets and his occasionally ‘contumelious’<sup>55</sup> behaviour, he remains the most warm-hearted of the early biographers, and, needless to say, in consequence, *A Buried Life* won Kate’s approval. She told Withers she thought it was:

wonderful that you gained his confidence as you did... I wish that in his lifetime I had realised that he was inly yearning for affection and sympathy, and that he was grateful to those who leapt the blank wall and refused to be repelled by his forbidding aspects.<sup>56</sup>

Kate had clearly found Withers’ book not only acceptable but enlightening. Her relationship with Grant Richards’ book was more complex, however.

*Housman 1897-1936* stands apart from the other early biographies in a number of ways. As Richards’ title indicates, he had, as Housman’s publisher, been associated with him for nearly 40 years, though their personal friendship had grown relatively slowly. As an author, Housman was not the easiest person to deal with, as he could be both impatient and exigent when he chose. Despite this, however, Housman’s friendship with Richards (1872-1948) was not only the longest, but was in many ways the closest of his life, though it was at root an unlikely one: although he was both son and nephew of Oxford dons, Richards was in no sense an academic. He was very much a man of the world, indeed rather self-consciously so. Alec

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53. *Ibid.*, 114.

54. *Ibid.*, 129.

55. *Ibid.*, 91.

56. Somerville, Withers Collection, Box 15, Letter dated 25 August 1940.

Waugh remembered meeting Richards when he himself was nineteen. He was clearly bowled over by Richards' *elan*, noting that:

He was supremely knowledgeable about food and wine and clothes and travel... He had in a high degree what the Edwardians called "style"... It was a sense of assurance, of self-confidence, that he diffused. He was never in a hurry, he was never flustered. His voice was warm, his manner suave.<sup>57</sup>

Richards also made a pseudonymous appearance as 'Barfleur' in Theodore Dreiser's *A Traveller at Forty* (of which he was the dedicatee). Richards was very much a minor hero in Dreiser's book, as he supervised the *ingenu* author's voyage from New York to London, invited him to stay at his country house, and introduced him to the fashionable metropolitan artistic world in which he was obviously well connected. This latter fact was reflected also in Richards' own novels (of which he published ten altogether) and his two volumes of autobiography.

However, a rather different verdict on Richards was provided by Gow, who found him no more than 'an unscrupulous... ruffian'.<sup>58</sup> Housman clearly thought otherwise, but Gow's remark is worth bearing in mind. Richards was far from 'sound' as a businessman, for example: his publishing house faced bankruptcy on more than one occasion, and he was even reduced to asking Housman for loans. Above all else, Richards appealed to the epicure in Housman, and their friendship was based on a real and genuine interest in food and wine. They also found each other congenial as travelling companions. Richards' reminiscences of Housman thus cast light on aspects of him which do not figure at all elsewhere. Kate commented that although Richards' book was 'full of prosaic detail, and sometimes a string of dull, unimportant letters on business matters... The book is likely to give a new picture of [Alfred] to those who imagine him to have been only a curmudgeonly recluse.'<sup>59</sup>

This is entirely fair. *Housman 1897-1936* is very much a miscellany,

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57. G. Richards, *Author Hunting*, Introduction by Alec Waugh (1960), xii-xiv.

58. Graves, 288.

59. Trinity AddMs 71-4.

and consequentiality was never one of Richards' strong points as an author. The book is not uniformly interesting, but many of its revelations are important ones. For example, although Housman was generous to his own nephews and godson, he is not normally associated with kindness to children; yet his own children, Richards assures us, liked Housman very much. Indeed, when the First World War had made foreign travel impossible, Richards persuaded Housman to join him on a family holiday in Cornwall which proved a great success:

He was indeed a delightful guest... with my wife... he was always at home, talking to her for hours... And he would talk to... my aunt about her husband and his books, and to the children about their amusements with equal readiness... He was never stiff either physically or mentally, never, if his manner was any test, bored, hardly ever remote, never dry.<sup>60</sup>

Richards also greatly enjoyed Housman's companionship on the three holidays which they took together in France. He again used the word 'delightful'<sup>61</sup> to describe him, and went on to recall Housman as 'equable in temper, seldom moody, a good talker, appreciative of attention, polite to those who smoothed his path.' He also noted, with some amusement perhaps, 'the milord manner in which A.E.H. journeyed'.<sup>62</sup> Richards' account of his 1927 tour of Burgundy with Housman was chiefly a catalogue of the food and wine consumed. By the standards of more recent times, Housman's daily consumption might seem excessive (two bottles of wine at lunch, for example, and a further bottle at dinner, followed by 'brandies of one sort or another'<sup>63</sup>), but Richards insisted more than once that Housman was essentially a man of moderation<sup>64</sup> and that he had never seen him drunk: 'Housman enjoyed his wine, drank it fastidiously, and carried it like a gentleman.'<sup>65</sup>

One of Richards' chief aims was, both for better and for worse,  
60. G. Richards, *Housman 1897-1936* (1941) 152.

61. *Ibid.*, 36.

62. *Ibid.*, 224.

63. *Ibid.*, 227.

64. *Ibid.*, 218.

65. *Ibid.*, 145.

to make Housman seem as 'normal' as possible. It is interesting that one of Richards' first comments on reading *A Buried Life* was that he thought Withers had made Housman out to be too emotional, remarking that he himself had never seen any signs of 'agony' or 'torment' in him. Revealingly, Richards also went on to suggest that perhaps his own nature did 'not attract intimacies of the kind of which Dr. Withers writes'.<sup>66</sup> Richards' inclination was to take Housman exactly as he found him, and by implication he rejected Withers' view that Housman's outwardly reticent manner masked hidden depths. His own position, quite simply, was that Housman 'provided in his own person no exceptional riddle', and he concluded that:

in my experience and in that of many of the people who were closest to him or who saw him most often there was very little justification for thinking that Housman had, in essence, any other side to his character than that which he presented, consciously or unconsciously to the more intimate of his acquaintances.<sup>67</sup>

In making this comment, Richards may well have been entirely true to his own experiences of Housman, and, given his own outgoing and sanguine nature, as well as the generally pleasurable circumstances under which he and Housman met, he had good reason to emphasise aspects of Housman's character which were not otherwise often seen. It was important that he did so. Unfortunately for his book, however, Richards also felt it necessary to raise other matters with which, for various reasons, he was less able to deal convincingly.

Despite the circumspection of Housman's previous biographers, by the time Richards came to write *Housman 1897-1936*, the question of his subject's homosexuality could no longer be ignored. Laurence had known well enough that a few of the thitherto suppressed items which he published in *More Poems* were open to a homosexual interpretation, and this is exactly what they had received from some of their reviewers. The best illustration of this, perhaps, was Desmond Shawe-Taylor's brilliant *aperçu* that 'from

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66. *Ibid.*, 159n.

67. *Ibid.*, 18.

Wenlock Edge [Housman] could see as far as Reading Gaol'.<sup>68</sup> To Richards, however, this comment (he actually described it as a 'charge') constituted a moral slur, and he felt it his job to defend Housman against the accusation that there was (as he called it) any 'unpleasant [i.e. homosexual] element' in his poetry.

The very fact that Richards was forced to use a euphemism in discussing Housman's homosexuality was revealing, and neatly symbolised Richards' attitude to the whole issue. Richards' tone in discussing Housman's sexuality is compounded of embarrassment and assertiveness in roughly equal measure. In consequence Richards' introduction of the subject is almost risible in its circumlocutions (lengthy quotation is, unfortunately, necessary here):

Some of Housman's admirers have been troubled by an unpleasant element they find in his poems, and element of which, granted predisposition on the part of the seekers, it may seem possible to distinguish traces. Let me say at once that I, who according to Laurence Housman, was probably the person, other than members of his own family, whose intercourse with A.E.H. extended over the widest range of years, as his friend and publisher, have not the slightest toleration for the suggestion implicit in much that has been written on this subject... these writers seem to have found in the possibility at which they hint an easy solution of the riddle they have in great measure made for themselves... The issue has also been complicated by the fact that allusion to what is hinted at is in the air, almost in the fashion.<sup>69</sup>

Richards dismissed these obscurely evoked imputations as nothing less than 'calumny'<sup>70</sup> of a kind which might 'sear virtue itself'. In particular, he thought that Shawe-Taylor's observation had put 'a stigma on Housman's reputation that [was] entirely unwarranted'.<sup>71</sup> He also believed (as did Kate)

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68. *Ibid.*, 297.

69. *Ibid.*, 294.

70. *Ibid.*, 295.

71. *Ibid.*, 297.

that Laurence Housman's treatment of Alfred's emotional life in *A.E.H.* had only served to encourage those who wished to speculate further about it, declaring loftily that: 'it never occurred to me to suspect any deviation from a perfectly normal, "respectable", and responsible way of life, or to suppose that anything else might be dug out of his poems.'

Barely concealing his irritation, Richards went so far as to insist that he had:

asked certain of [Housman's] friends in Cambridge and elsewhere whether they ever observed the slightest sign of the leanings of which he is suspected. Never has their response supported the accusation... Look with your memory's eye...at the wiry frame of that man, at the lines and contours of his head. Had that man the failing now fastened on him? I swear not.

His readers might be forgiven for thinking that, at this point, Richards was protesting too much, and indeed might even be affronted by his man-of-the-world bluster. It has already been suggested that Housman's previous biographers could be open to the charge of disingenuousness: both Gow and Laurence Housman, when touching on the subject of Housman's sexuality, had offered speculation about a question to which they knew the answer. Richards went much further, however, preferring outright denial, and, in the process, actually distorting and misrepresenting information to which he himself had been uniquely privy. Rather gratuitously, for example, Richards drew attention to the fact that in 1932 he had undertaken to rearrange Housman's large library of modern books. As a result, he thought it necessary to reassure his readers that he had found the contents of this library 'entirely seemly and creditable to a scholar whose interests were normal and widely spread.'<sup>72</sup> However, Richards' reordering of Housman's library would have involved his discovering that it actually contained a significant number of volumes which dealt with matters of sexuality (and especially homosexuality) as well as some items which might have been thought of as pornographic.<sup>73</sup> Unless Housman had stored these books

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72. *Ibid.*, 299-300.

73. P.G. Naiditch, 'The Extant Portion of the Library of A. E. Housman, Part IV',

separately, Richards could hardly have been unaware of them (indeed it has even been suggested that he helped Housman to procure some of them),<sup>74</sup> and his outright denial of their existence verges on the fraudulent.

There is a further reason why Richards might have felt some unease in treating of Housman's personal life. Having taken holidays with him in Paris, Richards knew that Housman did not always spend his time there unaccompanied, and that he kept private engagements with individuals and in locations whose identities he chose not to reveal.<sup>75</sup> Whatever the purpose of Housman's associations and meetings may have been (and both Richards and Housman remained tight-lipped on the subject), it would be strange if Richards had not speculated about their nature. Housman's assignations may have been perfectly innocent ones, but by no means all of Housman's more recent biographers have been sure that they were.<sup>76</sup> Richards' previous denial that there was any 'other side' to Housman's character thus remains highly suspect, and it is difficult not to find in the very vehemence with which Richards defends Housman's moral purity, the voice of someone who was working very hard to keep potentially embarrassing matters concealed.

*Housman 1897-1936*, however, was a work by diverse hands, in that Richards included ten appendices by other contributors as well as the Preface by Kate. Kate claimed that her preface's purpose was to supplement Richards' narrative. She found it highly convenient to praise Richards for having 'made accuracy his foremost aim. Every fact not drawn from his personal knowledge or direct from letters has been carefully verified.' This was yet again an instance of Kate's approving a treatment of Housman's life which was consistent with the one she wished to read, though this did not prevent her from declaring that 'the fullest possible knowledge of [Housman's] private life... [did] not belong to Mr. Richards,'<sup>77</sup> but to herself.

Kate then resumed her own appropriation of Housman's early years, again taking his 'great and real troubles' as her basis, and going over some familiar ground in the process. Thus she wrote of Housman's having had to cope with 'his mother's lamentable death', and the loss of *HSJ* 31 (2005) 154-80.

74. Norman Page, *A. E. Housman A Critical Biography* (1983) 12.

75. Richards, 43; *Letters* I.411, 546; *Letters* II.293.

76. Blocksidge, 181-5.

77. Richards, xi.



religious faith which followed.<sup>78</sup> She once more mentioned the death of Edward Housman, and the family difficulties which surrounded it. She was sceptical that this was the reason for Alfred's failure at Oxford, though she reiterated her view that the failure was the most damaging single event in his life, leaving him 'stricken and petrified'.<sup>79</sup> Within a relatively short space, Kate's rather charged writing did as much as it could to evoke the intensity of Housman's youthful sufferings, and to suggest the permanent damage which they wrought in him. Significantly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, Kate made no reference to Moses Jackson. Indeed, at the moment at which she might have done so, she, just like Richards, took her own refuge in circumlocution and obscurity.

It has already been noted that Kate's chapter in the 1936 *Recollections* attempted to put together a portrait of her brother which aimed at some kind of psychological coherence. She had much the same purpose in her preface, but on this occasion it is difficult not to see her as having wandered into areas in which she was not expert. Possessed of what appears to be a smattering of psychological terminology, Kate wrote as follows about Housman's emotional life:

Repression on the battles of adolescence must have played a part in the formation of his character, and certainly that was a direction in which he kept a restraining hold on himself.

In order to buttress these ruminations, Kate even invoked an article by Aldous Huxley from *The News Chronicle*, in which he had asserted that:

excessive repression of the sexual impulses tends, by some obscure mechanism of compensation, to produce an excessive development of pride and ambition.<sup>80</sup>

Consequently, she concluded that the result of Alfred's

deflected instincts was the definite production in him of

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78. Ibid.

79. Ibid., xv.

80. Ibid., xiii.

a form of sex antagonism, not absolute, but always ready to incline him to belittle the opposite sex because he felt himself superior... His conception of virtue was certainly something much wider than sex-integrity, indeed I think he despised that aspect of it as belonging to the lowest and most obvious plain of morality.

In a purely literal sense, it is not really clear what Kate means here, or indeed if she even knew herself. Her own words parallel the elaborate periphrases of Richards' when he had found himself on similarly uncomfortable territory. Kate had again attempted to offer a reading of her brother's character which would appear definitive, and consequently, she hoped, deter further exploration from unsuitable or hostile quarters. She reinforced this in her ultimately illogical conclusion that

those of his critics who probe into [Housman's] past, certain that it must contain a period of bitter emotional experience, miss the mark if they think that any incident in his life needs concealment.

Superficially, a reader of *Housman 1897-1936* could be forgiven for thinking that Richards and Kate had made common cause in the book, and indeed that they had done so in comparable ways. Both had wished to preserve Housman's reputation in the face of what they saw as 'calumny', and had colluded in judging that he was 'impeccable in conduct, and singularly free from any amorous entanglements'.<sup>81</sup> Where others had suggested that Housman's outward manner concealed even darker depths, Kate and Richards had both issued their own denials that such depths existed, and in so doing, of course, had quite consciously connived at obscuring the truth.

Two interesting glosses on *Housman 1897-1936* can be found in subsequent correspondence, and both of them involved Laurence. Clearly the old antipathy between Kate and Laurence had continued: Laurence, in a letter to Gow, regretted Kate's preface, claiming that it was 'well done from her point of view; but she says things which you and I know to be untrue'.<sup>82</sup>

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81. *Ibid.*, xiv.

82. Trinity AddMs 71-3.

Kate herself then went so far as actually to pin on Laurence much of the blame for Grant Richards' shortcomings. She, like Richards, believed that it was Laurence's evasiveness in *A.E.H.* which had served to encourage speculation over the very matter about which she had been even more evasive herself, and she was clearly irritated that discussion of Alfred's sexuality now seemed to be something which it was beyond her power to control. She upbraided Laurence:

It appears that since your A.E.H. Memoir appeared critics in reviews and other ways, have deduced that you did not reveal all you knew, and were unduly reticent. Furthermore, they seem, because you scouted the belief that Alfred was soured by a love-rebuff, to conjecture that he was the victim of moral depravity and ashamed of it.

Kate even made much the same accusation of Richards, believing that his attempts to defend Housman's reputation against charges of 'moral depravity', had actually done much to damage it:

The written charges are all very veiled, and not very convincing, but I gather that more has been *said* than written in the Grant Richards circle... The consequence is that quite properly contesting conclusions drawn by reviewers, he starts to defend Alfred in matters that have not been mentioned in print – so putting them into the hands of people who have never entertained any evil suspicions against Alfred. Grant Richards' inconclusive defence is to say that he "does not believe it".

Kate moved on to a new and completely unexpected subject, however, when she claimed to have heard that Richards 'contends that there was nothing wrong in the Gondolier friendliness, but conjectures it may have been a case like Ed. Fitzgerald's "Posh"'.<sup>83</sup>

Housman's 'friendliness' with Andrea, his Venetian Gondolier, has been a subject of interest to his biographers ever since Richard Perceval

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83. Sotheby's London Sale Catalogue, 9 July 1968, 161.

Graves stated his belief that the relationship in question was a sexual one (an interpretation which has been challenged, not least by the present author). What is particularly interesting about Kate's reference to it, however, is the fact that rumours about this relationship had obviously been circulating already, even, perhaps, in Housman's own lifetime. This provides further evidence that, despite the best endeavours of Kate and others, Housman's homosexuality had become more widely acknowledged in the literary world than she, in particular, had wished it to be.

Laurence's attitude to his brother's sexuality inevitably differed from Kate's, however. Although in *A.E.H.* he had ostensibly denied the existence of any emotional complexities in Alfred's life, as already suggested, his doing so had essentially constituted a holding action. Unlike Kate and Richards, Laurence did not see homosexuality as a sign of moral depravity. Quite the opposite in fact: not only was he a homosexual himself, but he had been so in a more public way than Alfred ever was, for a time openly consorting with a male lover,<sup>84</sup> visiting Oscar Wilde in Paris, and being loosely associated with the movement for homosexual law reform. Laurence was fully aware of the sensitivities surrounding any suggestions about Alfred's sexual nature at the time of his death, but he accurately predicted that public attitudes to homosexuality in general (and Alfred's in particular) would change with the passage of time. He had written quite explicitly to Gow, less than a month after Alfred's death, that:

I am pretty well convinced that we are in a definite transitional period of public opinion over the H.S. [sic] problem and that in the future it would add rather than subtract from Alfred's reputation if it were guessed that he had that burden laid upon him by the blind God of Nature.<sup>85</sup>

(Incidentally in this letter Laurence also remarked that Kate was 'quite well aware of the H.S. problem, and has guessed it in regard to A.E.H.')

Apart from his preservation (many would say mutilation) of Alfred's poetic notebooks, Laurence made another important contribution to Housman's after-life, when, in 1942, he placed, as already mentioned,

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84. J. Hunt, 'Laurence Housman - The Younger Brother', *HSJ* 16 (1990) 10.

85. Trinity AddMs 71-139.

Housman's diaries in the British Museum under a 25-year embargo. That the lifting of this embargo would coincide by a matter of days with the legalising of adult homosexuality in England was something which Laurence could hardly have foreseen, but it was almost uncannily in keeping with his own view of how attitudes to homosexuality would develop. Laurence's gesture involved another coincidence too. It will be remembered that Housman himself had dropped his hint about a 'few pages' which he had intended to deposit in the British Museum to be opened 50 years after his death. Perhaps Laurence was aware of this when he had provided the Museum with a few pages himself. Whilst it can in no way be conclusively proved that A. E. Housman had contemplated leaving clues about the nature of his 'buried life', Laurence believed that he might well have done, expressing the view in old age that 'Alfred definitely wished me to make the truth known when he was safely tucked away'.<sup>86</sup> Whilst it is possible that Laurence may have said this for effect (he was not above such things), it was not, ultimately, a preposterous claim, and it was one which, in its own way, showed much more respect for Housman's memory than the deceptions of Kate Symons or Grant Richards.

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86. Graves, 268.

## The Clock House

*Julian Hunt*

Present-day visitors to Bromsgrove bent on seeing ‘Housman Country’ are guided around the town by brown heritage signs tracing a route called the ‘Housman Trail’. Commencing at Catshill Church, where A.E. Housman’s grandfather was the first incumbent, the signs take the pilgrim to ‘Housmans’, the farmhouse in which the poet was born, and then along the lane to the Clock House, where he spent his teens. Alas, the Clock House was demolished in 1976, and replaced with two more modest houses. A 1920s clock tower remains, however, and there is a plaque to impress upon the visitor the importance of the site.

The Clock House is situated at Bournheath, in the north-west corner of Bromsgrove, where it adjoins the parish of Belbroughton. The land which went with the house was partly in Catshill, and partly in Fockbury, these being two of the ancient ‘yields’ or hamlets of Bromsgrove. The Clock House was too large to be called a farmhouse, yet it was not grand enough for a manor house. Its occupants had always been well to do and were generally given the title ‘Mr’ in Bromsgrove’s parish registers. The Clock House had date-stones fixing the date of one rebuilding at 1660 and another at 1880. It had once had a clock, or perhaps a sun dial, on a prominent gable. From the 1790s to the 1860s, it was occupied by a succession of clergymen, one of whom changed the name of the house to ‘The Rookery’ and another, the Rev. Thomas Housman, called it ‘Fockbury House’. The house had reverted to its original name of the Clock House before the surviving clock tower was added by a 20<sup>th</sup> century owner.

The earliest family we can safely locate at the Clock House is that of Thomas Wilkes, who made his will in 1681, describing himself as of Bournheath, yeoman.<sup>1</sup> Having made provision for his wife Anne and his daughter Elizabeth, he left his ‘mansion house wherein I now live’ to his eldest son, also named Thomas. With it went several enclosures called the Hollow Close, the Grove, the two Highmores, the Moorehowse Leasow, and a meadow called the Parke, plus various strips of land, some newly

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1. Will of Thomas Wilkes of Bournheath, 1681.

enclosed from Intall Field, one of the common arable fields of Catshill. There were several other closes called the Hirons, the two Broomy Hills and the Well Close, all in Fockbury. Thomas Wilkes had already set aside parcels of land for each of his younger sons, all of whom were under 21. John Wilkes was to receive the Perry Field Close and six strips in the Raye Field, one of the common arable fields of Fockbury. Joseph Wilkes was to get the Cockshutt, the two Hollowe Closes, the Hollowe Field and the Coppice Close, plus a parcel of land called Brimstons, near Brimston Lane. Another son, Burrell, probably named after a rich relative, was to receive Butlers Close, Raynscrofte Close, Richards Meadow and a parcel of land in Intall Field called Stockins, which was partly enclosed. The youngest son, William, was to get a messuage or tenement in Fockbury Yield in the occupation of Gilbert Saunders, with the close and backside adjoining, four strips in Intall Field and a meadow called Orfords Meadow.

The fact that the Clock House had a park and sufficient land to divide between four sons shows that it was an unusually large property. After Thomas Wilkes's death, his friends came to the Clock House to make an inventory of his goods. They went room by room, listing furniture, plate and linen in the hall, parlour, kitchen, buttery and four bedrooms. There were fire places in the hall and kitchen but not in the bedrooms. In the cock loft, which we might call an attic, were 142 cheeses and ninety pounds of flax. In the dayhouse, or dairy house, were four fitches of bacon and five fitches of beef. Although he had three spinning wheels, there is no evidence in the inventory that Thomas Wilkes was involved in the manufacture of linen. Nor is there any mention of anvils or nail making tools which are a common feature in Bromsgrove wills of the period. Thomas Wilkes's wealth was clearly tied up in farming stock, for he had seven cows worth £44, three yearlings & two weanings, four horses worth £7 10s, 37 sheep worth £4, plus two hogs and four stores. Although the inventory was taken in January, Thomas Wilkes had 60 bushels of barley worth £4 10s., four hard corn ricks and one oat rick worth £20, two mows of barley worth £9, a mow of peas at £4, and hay worth £2. He also had ten acres of standing corn valued at £6 13s 4d. With a total value of £195 10s 8d, this is one of the most prosperous farming inventories to have survived from 17<sup>th</sup> century Bromsgrove.

Thomas Wilkes's eldest son, Thomas, died in 1700, describing

himself as of Bournheath, yeoman.<sup>2</sup> He left his property to be divided equally between his two brothers John and Joseph, charged with the payment of an annuity of £5 to his unmarried sister Elizabeth Wilkes. He must have come down in the world, for his inventory amounted to only £23 16s 10d. His brothers sold the Clock House to a local farmer named Joseph Smith and the Wilkes family disappeared from the immediate locality.

Joseph Smith of Bournheath, yeoman, revived the status of the Clock House and left substantial property at his death in 1725.<sup>3</sup> He was the grandson of William Smith of the Breach, Halesowen, who in 1684 had left a house and land at Hunnington to endow a grammar school there.<sup>4</sup> Although Joseph Smith had lived in Belbroughton before purchasing the Clock House from John Wilkes, he still retained property in Halesowen, for his family paid a heriot on his land in Romsley in 1725.<sup>5</sup> His property in Bromsgrove was augmented in 1718 when his only son, William Smith, died unmarried, leaving to his father Fockbury Mill Farm and Fockbury Corn Mill, in the occupation of John Carpenter, Ambrose Waterson and his son John Waterson. William Smith had bought this property from Katherine Giffard of Worcester, widow, and her son Peter Giffard.<sup>6</sup> Joseph Smith followed his ancestor in leaving money to charity, in the form of two separate rent charges of £5 each, charged on the Clock House estate, to fund clothing for the poor of Belbroughton and Bromsgrove. These payments to the overseers of the poor of the two parishes were still being made by Joseph Brettell, great-grandfather of A.E. Housman and owner of the Clock House from 1830-47, and are noted in a conveyance of the house in 1880.<sup>7</sup>

On the death of Joseph Smith of Bournheath in 1724, the Clock House and Fockbury Mill passed to his daughter Mary who had married her cousin, William Smith, another grandson of William Smith of the Breach. The initials 'WS' and the date 1758 are picked out as dark 'headers' in the brickwork of Fockbury Mill. William Smith of Bournheath died in 1761,<sup>8</sup> leaving a son, also named William, and a daughter Mary, married

2. Will of Thomas Wilkes of Bournheath, 1700.

3. Will of Joseph Smith of Bournheath, 1725.

4. Will of William Smith of Halesowen, 1684.

5. Lyttelton Account Book W.R.O. BA 8249.

6. Will of William Smith, 1717.

7. Charity Commissioners Report: Smith's Charity.

8. William Smith of Bourn Heath buried at Bromsgrove 2 September 1761.



to William Clinton of Belbroughton. In his will, William Smith hoped that his son would lead a sober and regular life (suggesting that he had not done so up until that time). Having inherited the Clock House, the son, William Smith, married Elizabeth Barber at Worcester, 14 July 1762,<sup>9</sup> but he died in September of that year without making a will.<sup>10</sup> As he had no children, the heir to the Clock House and considerable property was his sister, Mary Clinton. As Mary Clinton lived in some style at Springfield House in Belbroughton, and had no need of the Clock House, William Smith's young widow, Elizabeth, carried on living there. She had every right to remain in possession of the house as she had dower rights to half of the property. Elizabeth Smith must have remained at the Clock House, at least until her second marriage.

In 1767, Elizabeth Smith, widow, was married at Bromsgrove Church to the Rev. John Tayler, Curate of Hanbury. The couple had a large family. The eldest daughter, Elizabeth Tayler, married Thomas Shrawley Vernon, who was to inherit Hanbury Hall from a distant relative in 1818.<sup>11</sup> Some of the Rev. John Tayler's children were baptised at Dodderhill, near Droitwich, rather than at Hanbury or Bromsgrove. Following his appointment as Curate of St Bartholomew's Church, Birmingham, the Rev. Tayler's youngest son, Charles was baptised in Birmingham. It appears that the Rev. John Tayler lived at the Clock House from this time onwards as the tenant of Mary Clinton. When he made his will in 1798, he described himself as 'the Rev. John Tayler of Fockbury in the parish of Bromsgrove in the County of Worcester clerk and minister of St Bartholomew's in Birmingham in the County of Warwick.' He died in 1798 at the age of 55 and was buried at Bromsgrove. He left his sons considerable property in Worcestershire and Lincolnshire and annuities of £200 each to his daughter Elizabeth and her

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9. William Smith of Bromsgrove m. Elizabeth Barber minor St Nicholas Worcester 14 July 1762.

10. Mr William Smith of Bourne Heath buried at Bromsgrove, 22 September 1762; letters of Administration of the estate of William Smith granted to Elizabeth Tayler, 9 March 1669.

11. Thomas Shrawley Vernon m. Elizabeth Tayler dau Rev John Tayler minister of St Bartholomews, at St Martins, Birmingham 4 December 1790. Their daughter Mary, born at Drayton in Chaddesley Corbet in 1798, was to marry William Housman, great uncle of A.E. Housman..

husband Thomas Shrawley Vernon.<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Tayler, his widow, died in 1814, aged 66, but she appears to have resided with her son, George Tayler, who lived at the Cottage Farm, Bournheath, until his death in 1850, aged 77.

When the commons and wastes of Bromsgrove were enclosed by Act of Parliament in 1799, Mary Clinton, as owner of the Clock House, was allotted 31 acres of land on the Lickey in lieu of her common rights. Mary Clinton died in 1805, leaving her property to her cousin, Elizabeth, wife of the Rev. Gabriel Powell.<sup>13</sup> The Rev Powell later became Curate of Oddingley, but lived at the Clock House, which he called 'The Rookery'. The Rev. Gabriel Powell of Bournheath, clerk, made his will in 1817, leaving the bulk of his property to his wife's nephew, John Gateley. He described the Clock House as

... all that messuage tenement or dwelling house called or known by the name of the Rookery, now in my own occupation, situate and being at Bournheath in the parish of Bromsgrove aforesaid with the out-offices, buildings, orchards, and gardens thereto adjoining and belonging And also those several closes, pieces or parcels of arable meadow or pasture land or ground adjoining or lying near to or contiguous to the said messuage or dwelling house and called or known by the several names of Watersons Close, Hollow Close, Vault Close, Middle Field, Little Hinton Field, Little Rushmoor, Big Rushmoor, and Mill Pound, which said several lands, including the homestall, orchards and gardens, contain together by estimation 45 acres 2 roods 32 perches.

He left to his nephew, John Tyler, the house and corn mill called Fockbury Mill, then in the occupation of John Broad.

The Rev Gabriel Powell died in 1817, but his widow, Elizabeth Powell, remained at the Clock House until her death in 1829. The property was advertised for sale in the *Worcester Herald*, 27 February 1830. Lot 1 was the dwelling house called the Clock House, with the outbuildings, yard, orchard, garden and six closes of land, called the Hollow Close, Vault Close, Middle Field, Little Rushmoor, Big Rushmoor and the Mill Pond Close, containing 33a 3r 9p. It was stated that 'the house was for some years the

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12. Will of Rev. John Tayler proved PCC proved 2 April 1799.

13. Rev. Gabriel Powell married Elizabeth Smith at Belbroughton, 2 April 1804.

residence of the Rev. John Tayler, subsequently of the Rev. Gabriel Powell, and since of Mrs Powell.’

The purchaser of the Clock House in 1830 was Joseph Brettell, who had been Bromsgrove’s leading solicitor for many years. He had lived at Steps House, in St John’s Street, but by 1830 he had retired to Staffordshire, where he was living with his son-in-law, Thomas Housman, then stipendiary curate of Kinver.<sup>14</sup> The purchase price was £2,828, a large sum for a country estate at this time.<sup>15</sup> Joseph Brettell insisted that his solicitors in Bromsgrove, Messrs Vernon & Minshull, compile a thorough pedigree of the Smith family of Hunnington and Bourneheath to prove the title from 1700-1830.<sup>16</sup> Joseph Brettell initially leased the Clock House to Thomas Morgan,<sup>17</sup> but later took up residence there himself. When the Charity Commissioners investigated Joseph Smith’s Charity in 1837, they found that:

#### Smith’s Charity

It is stated on an ancient Table of Benefactions in Bromsgrove Church, that Joseph Smith gave, by will £5 per annum, to be distributed in clothing, for the poor of the Parish of Bromsgrove, the money to be paid out of his estate at Bourne Heath to the trustees, on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of November, and the clothes to be distributed to the poor on St Thomas’s Day for ever. The estate at Fockbury, near Bourne Heath, charged with the payment of this annuity, is called the Clock House Farm, and is now the property of Joseph Brettell Esq, who resides there. The sum of £5 is received by the churchwardens, and carried to their general account, out of which flannel has been purchased and distributed by the four churchwardens, chiefly among poor widows or persons having large families. Previous to this charity coming into the churchwardens’ hands, it was disposed of by Mrs Powell, who was then the owner of the Clock House estate.

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14. Worcester Journal 6 May 1830.

15. Conveyance 27 December 1831 Library of Birmingham MS 3375/1/1/84.

16. Ibid.

17. Register of Electors, Bromsgrove, 1833.

In 1834, the perpetual curacy of Kinver became vacant, but Joseph Brettell's son in law, the Rev. Thomas Housman, was passed over in favour of Kinver's schoolmaster. After a period 'without cure of souls', the Rev. Thomas Housman was appointed Curate at Bromsgrove in 1836. The Rev. Housman lived initially at Lydiate House, Lydiate Ash, near Bromsgrove, a locality now better known as Junction 4 on the M5 Motorway. When the Rev. Housman was appointed Perpetual Curate of the new church at nearby Catshill in 1838, he moved to the Clock House, where he lived with his father in law, Joseph Brettell, and his sister in law, Mary Brettell. For the next 30 years, the Clock House was effectively the vicarage of Catshill. The Rev. Housman's younger children, Robert and Joseph, were born at the Clock House and baptised at Catshill.

Joseph Brettell died at the Clock House, 22 March 1847, aged 89. He left the house to his unmarried daughter Mary Brettell.<sup>18</sup> Mary Brettell lived another 20 years at the Clock House with her sister, Ann, and her husband the Rev Thomas Housman. When she died in 1867, Mary Brettell left the house in trust for the lives of the Rev. Thomas Housman and his wife Ann, after whose deaths it was to be shared equally between their children.<sup>19</sup> By this time, the Rev. Thomas Housman had retired as Perpetual Curate of Catshill and moved to Lyme Regis. He died there in 1870 aged 74.

For several years, the Clock House was let, first to the Rev. Samuel Back, the new incumbent of Catshill, and then to Captain Samuel James Dakin, formerly of the 7th Dragoon Guards. When Dakin died in 1872, the Rev. Thomas Housman's son, Edward Housman, a Bromsgrove solicitor then living at Perry Hall, in the centre of Bromsgrove, brought his young family to live at the Clock House. Edward Housman had been brought up at the Clock House and enjoyed the larger gardens and rural aspect of his childhood home. Another benefit of the move was that when Edward Housman remarried in 1873, his new wife, Lucy Agnes Housman, could commence her duties as step-mother to his children in a home she could call her own. The move meant a longer walk to Bromsgrove School for Edward

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18. Will of Joseph Brettell of Bromsgrove gent, 13 March 1847, proved PCC 14 May 1847.

19. Will of Mary Brettell of Fockbury in the parish of Bromsgrove spinster, 26 April 1865, proved Worcester 23 October 1872.

Housman's son A.E. Housman, but the poet continued to enjoy brisk country walks throughout his life. Edward and Lucy Housman remained at the Clock House until 1878 when financial difficulties forced them to take the family back to Perry Hall. The Clock House, with six acres of land, was finally sold by Ann Housman, widow of the Rev. Thomas Housman, on 30 April 1880 to Francis Foster Barham.<sup>20</sup> Ann Housman died at Lyme Regis on 6 June 1882. The remaining land near the Clock House was sold by auction by the Trustees of Mrs Housman on 13 July 1883.<sup>21</sup>

The new owner of the Clock House, Frank Foster Barham, was the chief representative of the Bank of England in Birmingham. He commissioned the Birmingham architects Osborn and Reading to restore and enlarge the house, which he probably intended as a country retreat. In 1881 he let the new house to Lieut. General Thomas Elwyn. In 1884, perhaps because of a change in Barham's circumstances, the Clock House was put on the market. The lavish sale catalogue contained several architect's impressions of the house and gardens.<sup>22</sup> No doubt Mr Barham set a high reserve in order to recoup his huge outlay on the rebuilding. In the event, the house did not sell and remained in the ownership of the Barhams for another ten years. The tenant in 1891 was Thomas Wells, a fender manufacturer and brass founder. The Barhams eventually sold the Clock House in 1895 to William Whitehouse, a gas and electric light fittings manufacturer from Birmingham. Whitehouse in turn sold the house in 1909 to Reginald Keble Morcom, of Bellis and Morcom, of Birmingham, manufacturers of diesel engines for electricity generating.

Reginald Keble Morcom bought more property in and around Fockbury and Bournheath, including Valley House, which was part of the sale of the remainder of William Whitehouse's property in 1919. As the place of birth of the poet A.E. Housman, Valley House was renamed Housmans by the Morcoms. In 1949, it was leased to Mervyn Phippen Pugh, the then prosecuting solicitor at Birmingham. His son, John Pugh, was one of the founders of the Housman Society in 1973. R.K. Morcom was aware that the Clock House, as reconstructed in 1880, lacked a clock. When in 1928, he was offered a clock from Garton's Brewery, Bristol, he commissioned the

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20. Worcestershire Record Office BA 5439/16.

21. Worcester Journal 2 June 1883.

22. W.R.O. BA 4788/4.

Catshill architect, Robert Thompson, to design a clock tower to house it.<sup>23</sup> The clock tower survives to the present day. R.K. Morcom contributed to a long newspaper article on the Clock House in the 1950s. It contains many misconceptions, particularly regarding the title deeds to the house, which were clearly intermixed with those of other properties acquired by Mr Morcom.

Reginald Keble Morcom died on 5 May 1961. The Clock House was then bought by Charles Patrick Duncan Davidson, a director of Lucas Industries. In 1971, the Clock House was again for sale, advertised as ‘An interesting Country Residence of considerable historical and architectural appeal.’ It had five main bedrooms and four bathrooms, plus three ‘luxury’ flats in the West Wing. The gardens and woodland extended over six acres.<sup>24</sup> The house was evidently not appealing enough for the new owner, a local builder named Ted Greaves. He demolished the house in 1976 and erected two houses on the site, one of which is still called the Clock House. A third house comprises the former gatehouse and the clock tower of 1928. The plaque on this building tells the visitor that this was ‘the site of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Fockbury House (later known as the Clock House) home of A.E. Housman, scholar and poet, in his youth, 1873-1878.’

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23. Newscutting, Housman Folder, Bromsgrove Library.

24. *Bromsgrove Messenger* 29 October 1971.

## Wake: The Silver Dusk Returning

Andrew Breeze

In recent issues of this journal, it has been argued that Housman modelled some of his poems on medieval ones. ‘Oh See How Thick the Goldcup Flowers’ (*ASL V*) is a *pastourelle*, a dialogue in rural surroundings where a girl is encountered and sought as an object of desire; ‘The Lad Came to the Door by Night’ (*ASL LIII*) is a *sérénade*, on a lover’s nocturnal visit to the beloved’s window; ‘Star and Coronal and Bell’ (*Last Poems XVI*) and ‘Delight It Is in Youth and May’ (*More Poems XVIII*) are *reverdies*, welcomes to the spring which then deal with love. In all these A.E.H. poured new poetic wine into old poetic bottles, the result being *trouvère* forms full of nineteenth-century irony and pessimism. He perhaps learnt the possibilities from Alfred Jeanroy’s *Les Origines de la poésie lyrique en France au moyen âge*, analysing such genres with massive thoroughness and appearing in 1889, seven years before *A Shropshire Lad*.

Another kind of lyric discussed by Jeanroy (but not previously related to Housman’s verse) is the Provençal *alba* or French *aube*. It is to dawn what the *sérénade* is to night: an address or dialogue on love, occurring not in darkness but as the sun rises. It has different guises. Sometimes there is a watchman, warning lovers that they must part. Sometimes the speakers are lover and beloved, disputing whether day has come and one of them must go quickly. A late variant is John Donne’s ‘The Sun Rising’, with the poet denouncing the eye of day for intruding upon him and his lass. Yet the theme occurs most famously in Act III of *Romeo and Juliet*, where dawn has come but Juliet is in denial:

Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day;  
It was the nightingale, and not the lark,  
That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear.

For all that, it is soon clear that the song is not of nightingale, but lark; the light not of moon, but sun; and Romeo must go at once, or face death from the Capulets.

The pretty conceits of *aube* or *alba* would be known to Housman. If we seek a possible instance in his work, we soon find it in 'Reveille' (*ASL IV*), here quoted in full.

Wake: the silver dusk returning  
Up the beach of darkness brims,  
And the ship of sunrise burning  
Strands upon the eastern rims.

Wake: the vaulted shadow shatters,  
Trampled to the floor it spanned,  
And the tent of night in tatters  
Straws the sky-pavilioned land.

Up, lad, up, 'tis late for lying:  
Hear the drums of morning play;  
Hark, the empty highways crying  
'Who'll beyond the hills away?'

Towns and countries woo together,  
Forelands beacon, belfries call;  
Never lad that trod on leather  
Lived to feast his heart with all.

Up, lad: thews that lie and cumber  
Sunlit pallet never thrive;  
Morns abed and daylight slumber  
Were not meant for man alive.

Clay lies still, but blood's a rover;  
Breath's a ware that will not keep.  
Up, lad: when the journey's over  
There'll be time enough for sleep.



So we have a subject for enquiry. If ‘The Lad Came to the Door by Night’ is a *sérénade*, like ‘On Your Midnight Pallet Lying’ (*ASL XI*), is ‘Wake: The Silver Dusk Returning’ their daytime equivalent? A survey of *aube* and *alba* will supply an answer one way or the other, offering an exercise on Housman’s skills and use of tradition.

Jeanroy’s *Les Origines de la poésie lyrique* and other writings were influential. His characterization of the Provençal *alba* (which French *trouvères* adapted as the *aube*) is actually quoted in the word’s *OED* entry. ‘Réveillés, à l’aurore, par le cri du guetteur, deux amants qui viennent de passer la nuit ensemble se séparent en maudissant le jour qui vien trop tôt.’ In the earliest instances the pair are awoken by the lark or other songster, their tryst being out in the woods; later, they are in a castle or the like, where the alert is given by the watchman or a friend who comes to warn them that they must part.<sup>1</sup> The speaker of *ASL IV* may or may not relate to those bringers of ill tidings.

Jeanroy’s research in any case alerted British academic circles to the French and Provençal forms. Quoting a stanza of the famous (but anonymous) ‘En un vergier sotz fuella d’albespi’, E. K. Chambers (1866-1954) praised ‘the heart-throbs of the great Provençal *alba*:

Bels dons amics, fassam un joc novel,  
Ins el jardí en chanton li auzel,  
Tro la gaita toque son caramel.  
Oí Deus, oí Deus, de l’alba! Tan tost ve!

The nightingale, indeed, plays a conspicuous part in all this poetry.’<sup>2</sup> Hence *li auzel* ‘the birds’, with *gaita* being ‘watchman’, *caramel* ‘flageolet’, and *tost* ‘soon’. Jeanroy was further cited (in Welsh) by Sir Ifor Williams (1881-1965) of Bangor, who discovered three examples of *aube* by the fourteenth-century bard Dafydd ap Gwilym. In one of them the smooth-talking poet denies to the girl the implications of light appearing, crow croaking, and dogs barking. She is not fooled. She tells him to leave her bedroom directly, but without

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1. Alfred Jeanroy, *Les Origines de la poésie lyrique en France au moyen âge*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1904) 61-83.

2. *Early English Lyrics*, edd. E. K. Chambers and Frank Sidgwick (London, 1907) 270.

making a noise.<sup>3</sup> A parallel in contemporary England is the dawn-greeting in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer's 'great poem in praise of love'. Having slept together for the first time, the happy pair are dismayed to see dawn and hear cockcrow. Like Donne two centuries later, Troilus abuses the sun ('Acorsed be thi comyng into Troye!') in a reproach lacking an equivalent in Boccaccio, Chaucer's source.<sup>4</sup>

More important for Housman's lyric is debate on the origins of the *aube*. Crucial evidence comes from two poems in Latin, one of the late ninth century, the other (with a refrain in Provençal) in a tenth-century Vatican manuscript. The first is a famous call to arms. It begins *O tu qui servas armis ista moenia*, 'O you, armed and guarding these walls!' and relates to the year 892 at Modena in north Italy, when its garrison expected attack by Hungarians. It is a stirring piece. Its poet orders a watchman to stay alert, and closes (after allusions to Troy and Rome and invocations to Christ and the Virgin) by enjoining 'brave youths' to 'keep your armed watch' on the ramparts, allowing 'no deceit of the enemy' to get past.

This is close to Housman's 'Reveille' and its military allusions, as it is not close to lovelorn troubadours out in the dark (or in bed) with another man's wife. Yet Jeanroy still regarded the verses (in Raby's words) 'as an early variety of the *aube* (i.e., without a love-motive, but introducing the watchman who foretells the dawn).' In this context of *aube*, Jeanroy mentioned our second poem, which begins *Phebi claro nondum orto iurare* and has a refrain in Provençal. Raby, however, disagreed with Jeanroy, taking 'Phebi Claro' as no *alba* or love-song but a mere summons to arms.<sup>5</sup> His conclusion is debatable, though the authors of both poems assuredly urge watchmen to be on guard. Danger is at hand. Neglect the approach of day, and they may not see evening. As concerns origins for the two, Raby cited nothing in classical Greek or Latin, instead relating the first to a *planctus* assigned to Paulinus of Aquileia. It is a lament on Attila's destruction of Aquileia (in north-east Italy), where Paulinus (d. 802) was bishop. Its 'vigorous verses' tell of 'a proud city

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3. Ifor Williams, 'Dafydd ap Gwilym a'r Glêr', *The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion: Session 1913-1914* (London, 1915) 83-204

4. *The Book of Troilus and Criseyde by Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. R. K. Root (Princeton, 1926), 10-12, 489-90.

5. F. J. E. Raby, *A History of Secular Latin Poetry in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1934) 1.289-90.

brought low, of massacre and outrage, the destruction of churches, the murder of priests.’<sup>6</sup> A Modena poet, preoccupied in 892 or so by Hungarian raids, might well recall a century-old poem on Aquileia’s devastation by Huns in 452.

Let us now look in detail at ‘O Tu Qui Servas’ and ‘Phebi Claro Nondum Orto Iubare’, the two military poems which Jeanroy took as proto-*albas*. The first (surviving in a unique copy at Modena) was republished and translated by Laistner after the *MGH* edition by Ludwig Traube (1861-1907).<sup>7</sup> It was also translated by Brittain.

O thou who guardest the wall in arms,  
I warn thee not to fall asleep, but to watch.  
While Hector kept watch over Troy  
Guileful Greece was unable to capture it;  
But as soon as Troy was plunged into its first slumber  
The deceitful Sinon unfastened the treacherous belly of the horse.

After alluding to the geese that saved Rome, so that in one of their temples the Romans placed and adored a silver goose, the poet invokes Christ in lines more relevant to Housman’s than might be thought.

But let us worship the heavenly divinity of Christ  
And let us pay to him our hymns of jubilation.  
Trusting in his mighty protection,  
Let us be vigilant and sing to him these exulting songs:  
‘O Christ, king of the world, our divine custodian,  
Guard and protect this city.’

After further invoking Christ and his Mother, the poet closes with an address to Modena’s earthly defenders.

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6. F. J. E. Raby, *A History of Christian-Latin Poetry from the Beginnings to the Close of the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1953) 170.

7. M. L. W. Laistner, *Thought and Letters in Western Europe AD 500 to 900*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, 1957) 360-1, 397.

Brave youths, virile and bold in war,  
Let your songs be heard along the walls,  
And keep your armed watch in turn,  
So that no deceit of the enemy shall invade these ramparts.  
Let echo say, 'Ho! Comrade, watch!'  
And let echo answer 'Ho! Watch!' along the walls.

The translator finds 'curious' the 'blending of pagan mythology with invocations of Christ and the saints.'<sup>8</sup> Yet this is less strange than seems. There is progression from Troy and Rome to Modena, possessing the true faith of Christ.

In the 1960s, the Modena poem's relationship to the classic *alba* was complicated by new research. It was then that comparison with material in Greek, Latin, Egyptian, Kurdish, Malayan, Chinese, and even Quechua led scholars to regard the *alba* as once a popular genre, found all over the world and going back thousands of years. By the twelfth century, troubadours chancing upon this humble creature had (as it were) washed its face, given it smart new clothes, and launched it into society, treating a sub-literary form much as Higgins and Pickering treated Eliza Doolittle. Hence its success in Provençal, French, English, Welsh, and (as 'dawn-song') medieval German.<sup>9</sup> Peter Dronke then spoke of *aube* or *aubade* as part of the 'primordial, universal love-poetry of the people', with fragmentary European texts surviving from the eleventh century. But he was at first convinced that our second alleged *alba*, the 'problematic "Phebi claro nondum orto iubare"' (in a tenth-century Vatican manuscript), was not of their number. Like Raby, he took it at the time as 'about the dawn-watch of soldiers', not lovers.<sup>10</sup> His comment alerts us to implications in 'Wake: The Silver Dusk Returning', also with military implications absent from the mainstream *alba*.

The debate continued in the 1970s. Saville gave a new reading of 'O Tu Qui Servas'. It is 'alternately a monition to the soldiers and a prayer to Christ', who 'stands watch' and 'will fight off the enemy with his weapons'.

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8. Frederick Brittain, *The Penguin Book of Latin Verse* (Harmondsworth, 1962) xxiv, 156-7.

9. Olive Sayce, *Poets of the Minnesang* (Oxford, 1967) xv.

10. Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1968) 8, 353.

As for 'Phebi Claro', he thinks this 'somewhat mysterious' text is likewise a 'religious dawn-song', with 'Christ as watchman calling upon sinners to awake out of their sleep of sin', a theme going back to Prudentius and St Paul.<sup>11</sup> Others, however, saw 'Phebi Claro' as no such thing. Elizabeth Salter spoke of how this 'tenth-century Latin poem with its Provençal refrain probably gives us a glimpse of lyric now vanished from record, but well known to the innovators of the early twelfth century', when Guilhem de Poitou (1071-1127) began the great age of troubadour lyric.<sup>12</sup>

A solution came thanks to further discussion by Dronke, shedding a tentative but persuasive light on both 'O Tu Qui Servas' and 'Phebi Claro'. Taking further the ideas of Jeanroy and Raby, Dronke translates the latter (first published in 1881 by Johannes Schmidt) as follows.

When Phoebus's bright beam has not yet risen,  
Aurora brings her slender light to earth;  
A watchman shouts to slumberers 'Arise!'  
    Dawn graces the dank sea.  
    Draws forth the sun,  
    Then passes.    Oh watchman,  
    Look how the dark    grows bright!

Our hunting enemies are bursting forth  
To intercept the idle and the rash;  
The herald pleads and calls on them to rise.  
    Dawn graces    the dank sea...

From Arcturus the north wind is released,  
The stars of heaven hide their radiance,  
The Plough is drawn towards the eastern sky.  
    Dawn graces    the dank sea...

Dronke speaks of 'aspects of this song as controversial, above all the refrain.' But he was sure that its Latin (not Provençal) part was no love-song or

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11. Jonathan Saville, *The Medieval Erotic 'Alba'* (New York, 1972) 135-6, 281-2.

12. Elizabeth Salter, 'The Mediaeval Lyric', in *The Mediaeval Lyric*, ed. David Daiches and Anthony Thorlby (London, 1973) 445-84.

genuine *alba*. The ambushers of the second stanza are not outraged husbands. Eliminate the refrain and we have a military (or religious?) poem, not one of love. Dronke therefore concludes that the text is not by a single author. A discrepancy implies this. While the Latin lines contain an address to sleepers, the Provençal ones address the watchman and may really be from an *alba*, with one of the lovers speaking to a guard as the other sleeps on. The Latin poet perhaps borrowed the lines for 'his more exalted composition, for the sake of a pleasing musical contrast and greater popular appeal.' Dronke makes a further point. The sense even of the Latin verses need not be literal. The enemies may not be human ones. They might be 'demons, whose attacks are described in military terms, and against whom the bravest and most vigilant souls warn the weaker *militēs Christi*.' He thus leaves us a choice between literal and spiritual interpretations of 'Phebi Claro'. For a literal reading of its Latin part he cites the Modena poem (and the Norse *Bjarkamál*, its speaker telling sleepers, 'I wake you / For the savage game of war!'). For a spiritual reading there are the Christian dawn-hymns of Ambrose, Prudentius, and their followers.<sup>13</sup> The Modena stanzas, which invoke Christ as true defender of the city, remind us that a shift from mere flesh and blood Hungarians to supernatural enemies, the rulers (as Paul told the Ephesians) of the darkness of this world, was easily made.

Dronke's brilliant interpretation of 'Phebi Claro', unexpectedly bringing together sacred and profane love, returns us to Housman. His reveille or dawn-song has no obvious precedent in Greek or Latin poetry, but does have some in Christian literature. At the back of it is chapter thirteen of the Epistle to the Romans, declaring how 'it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand; therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day,' where St Paul's word 'armour' implies a discipline that is military.

As for hymns of St Ambrose (d. 397) and Prudentius (d. after 405), they are explicit about casting off works of darkness, in the literal shape of evils that walk by night. In this they point towards 'O Tu Qui Servas' and 'Phebi Claro', which Jeanroy regarded as the earliest *albas*. In 'Aeterne Rerum Conditor' the cock crows, dawn comes:

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13. Peter Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric*, 2nd ed. (London, 1978) 170-2.

Hoc excitatus lucifer  
Solvit polum caligine:  
Hoc omnis errorum cohors  
Viam nocendi deserit.<sup>14</sup>

‘The sun, roused by him, clears darkness from the sky: the whole band of wandering spirits abandons the path of doing harm.’

In ‘Ales Diei Nuntius’, another hymn for cock-crow, Ambrose is echoed by Prudentius.

Ferunt vagantes daemona  
Lactos tenebris noctium  
Gallo canete exterritos  
Sparsim timere et cedere.

Invisa nam vicinitas  
Lucis, salutis, numinis  
Rupto tenebrarum situ  
Noctis fugat satellites.<sup>15</sup>

‘Wandering demons, which like the dark of night, are said to be startled when the cock crows, and here and there run away in fear. The coming of light, salvation, and God’s being (which are hateful to them) break the sloth of darkness and scatter the slaves of night.’

Such verses, familiar to clerics who sang them at Prime or Lauds, underpin Dronke’s view of ‘Phebi Claro’ as a warning against more than mortal enemies. So does Shakespeare. As the cock crows, the Ghost in the opening scene of *Hamlet* fades, leaving Marcellus to comment on how the ‘bird of dawning’ is at Christmas said to sing all night:

And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,  
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,  
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,

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14. *Sacred Latin Poetry*, ed. R. C. Trench, 2nd ed. (London, 1864) 244.

15. *The Oxford Book of Medieval Latin Verse*, ed. F. J. E. Raby (Oxford, 1959) 20.

So hallow'd and so gracious is that time.<sup>16</sup>

Marcellus clearly believed that, at other times, malicious spirits were one of the hazards of darkness.<sup>17</sup> The Welsh thought so too, as proved by a fifteenth-century calendar-poem, which tells how the Cock rejoices during the twelve days of Christmas, when Satan's despoiler was born.<sup>18</sup> *Hamlet* thus contains evidence for beliefs shared by Ambrose and Prudentius twelve centuries previous. Together with Latin poems meant to stiffen the resolve of sentinels at daybreak, it draws upon ancient and sinister implications of night.

What is the upshot of the above for 'Wake: The Silver Dusk Returning'? It is unexpected. Housman's lyric does not, after all (despite ambiguity on the sleeper there addressed), go back to the *alba* or *aube* of medieval love-lyric. But it does relate to Christian Latin hymns on daybreak. They themselves influenced 'O Tu Qui Servas' and 'Phebi Claro', which Jeanroy and others identified as *albas* (in part correctly). Nominally secular poems on dawn-attackers, they owe something to terrors recognized by Lady Macbeth:

Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,  
Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse.

Finally, another poem, so familiar that one hesitates to mention it.

Awake! For Morning in the Bowl of Night  
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight:  
And lo! the Hunter of the East has caught  
The Sultan's Turret in a Noose of Light.

But FitzGerald's version of Omar Khayyám goes on to activities (mainly involving alcohol) less manly than Housman's call to action. Though a sceptic and pessimist like FitzGerald, A.E.H. in his lyric presents a more bracing attitude to existence. It may even be a reply to FitzGerald, a reproof of the

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16. Douglas Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* (London, 1972) 98, 256.

17. *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London, 1982) 431.

18. *Early Welsh Gnostic and Nature Poems*, ed. Nicolas Jacobs (London, 2012) 31.



earlier poet's hedonism.

'Wake: The Silver Dusk Returning' is hence no copy-book rendering of a medieval poem by a nineteenth-century sensibility. It is not an *alba*, as 'Oh See How Thick the Goldcup Flowers' is a *pastourelle*, or 'The Lad Came to the Door by Night' and 'On Your Midnight Pallet Lying' are *sérénades*. It does, however, relate to Greek and Latin texts (none of the classical period) discussed in the context of the *alba*. Prominent amongst these are the New Testament, hymns by Ambrose and Prudentius, and 'O Tu Qui Servas' and 'Phebi Claro Nondum Orto Iubare'. Long unknown, the two last were discovered in the late nineteenth century and became anthology-pieces in the twentieth.<sup>19</sup> It is not difficult to see a link between them and *A Shropshire Lad* IV. There is the sleeper wakened; allusions to soldiering ('Reveille', 'drums of morning', 'foreheads beacon'); the demand that sloth be cast off; and perhaps the relation of watchman who wakens and one who is awoken. (Other aspects are purely Housmanian, such as the astronomy in the first stanza.) 'Wake: The Silver Dusk Returning' is thus a poem with no exact precedent, and certainly none in Classical Greek or Latin; but which can be shown as owing much to Scripture and medieval Latin verse, both unexpected sources for a lyric in *A Shropshire Lad*.

POSTSCRIPT. When this note was about to go to press, its editor pointed out to the writer that Milton's 'Carmina Elegiaca', twenty lines beginning 'Surge, age surge, leves, iam convenit, excute somnos', present a most interesting parallel to AEH's lyric. Milton urges an individual to rise from sleep, which is oppressed with troublesome dreams, and to take in the joys of a summer's day. Despite his allusions to classical Titan and Zephyrus, Milton (who seldom had a good word for the middle ages) is apparently putting a medieval form of poetry into neo-Latin guise. His sources and the possible use by Housman of his poem would repay investigation.

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19. *The Oxford Book of Medieval Latin Verse*, ed. Stephen Gaselee (Oxford, 1928) 53-4; Helen Waddell, *Mediaeval Latin Lyrics* (Harmondsworth, 1952) 150-1, 330-1.

## William Housman in Brighton

*Julian Hunt*

William Housman, great uncle of A.E. Housman, was one of several black sheep in the Housman family. He might not merit an article in the *Housman Journal* except for the facts that his house in Gloucestershire was to remain a favourite haunt of A.E.H. and that his daughter, Lucy Agnes, was to become the poet's step mother. The strong Housman tradition that William Housman left his wife and family and ran off to America with an actress appears to be an invention, designed to conceal a less glamorous story of financial misconduct and a moonlight flit to avoid creditors.

William Housman was the son of a well-respected Church of England clergyman in Lancaster and two of his own sons became clerics, one even becoming Rector of Quebec Cathedral. After practising as a solicitor for over 30 years, William Housman disappeared in 1851 when he was accused of embezzling the remaining assets of a bankrupt schoolmaster in Brighton. The recent addition of the *Brighton Gazette* to the list of titles on the British Newspaper Archive enables us to examine William Housman's later career in more detail and to uncover the real reason for his leaving the country.

William Housman, son of the Rev. Robert Housman and his wife Jane (Adams), was born in Leicester in 1793. The Rev. Housman moved back to his native Lancaster in 1796 and built St Anne's Church, Lancaster, of which he was incumbent from 1796-1836. In 1809, the young William Housman was articled John Higgin of Lancaster, attorney, with whom he was supposed to serve as clerk for five years. By 1815, he was a partner in the firm of Leigh, Mason & Housman, solicitors, New Bridge Street, London.<sup>1</sup> He may have owed this position to his uncle, John Adams, a Leicester hosier who had moved to Bromsgrove in Worcestershire to manage a worsted spinning mill. William Housman conducted business in London for John Adams and was party to Adams's purchase of Perry Hall, Bromsgrove, in 1819.<sup>2</sup> No doubt with his uncle's encouragement, William

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1. Jacksons Oxford Journal 26 Aug 1815.

2. Birmingham Archives 3375/523.

Housman made a very advantageous marriage in 1818 to Mary Vernon, whose father, Thomas Shrawley Vernon, was due to inherit Hanbury Hall in Worcestershire.<sup>3</sup> The marriage settlement would have given William Housman access to his wife's marriage portion, although any property should have been entailed on their sons. Despite his new-found wealth and position, William Housman found it expedient to move to the Island of Guernsey in 1820 and he was soon after declared bankrupt.<sup>4</sup> He later lived at Freshford in Somerset, at Tetbury in Gloucestershire, and, notably, at Woodchester House near Stroud. This elegant 18<sup>th</sup> century house was to be the family home from 1827-34 and from 1840-44. It was after a move to another fine house in the Close, Salisbury, that he was again declared bankrupt in 1837.<sup>5</sup> William Housman moved back to Woodchester in 1840 and his son Henry's recollections of collecting natural history specimens in the woods there are lovingly recorded in *The Story of Our Museum*, published in 1871. There was enough money to send his eldest surviving son, George Vernon Housman, to Cambridge in the same year.<sup>6</sup> It is not clear why William Housman left Woodchester in 1844, but we next find him in London in 1846, writing letters on behalf of a firm of solicitors named Bridges, Mason & Bridges, Red Lion Square, Holborn.<sup>7</sup> By 1848, William Housman was living in Brighton, where the young Henry Housman attended Brighton College.<sup>8</sup>

William Housman appears to have taken over an existing solicitor's practice, that of Sidney Walsingham Bennett, who had lived for many years at 63 Middle Street, Brighton. When Sidney Bennett died in December 1848, William Housman took on his son, Richard Christopher Bennett, as a clerk.<sup>9</sup> The firm was known as Bennett & Housman, and had a larger than

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3. William Housman of Lambeth in the Province of Canterbury bachelor married Mary Vernon of Bromsgrove spinster 3 September 1818 at Bromsgrove.

4. His second son George Vernon Housman was baptised at St Peter's Guernsey 15 October 1820; *London Gazette* 6 January 1821.

5. *London Gazette* 5 May 1837.

6. George Vernon Housman, admitted St John's College, Cambridge, 1840. Rector of Quebec Cathedral, 1886-7.

7. Shakespeare Centre, Stratford-upon-Avon ER8/5/91, 97.

8. Henry Housman, Brighton College, St John's College Cambridge, Rector of Bradley, Worcs, 1898-1912.

9. *Brighton Gazette* 21 December 1848; Articles 29 January 1849.

normal entry in the 1850 *Post Office Directory of Sussex*:

Bennett and Housman, solicitors, 63 Middle Street  
Housman, William solicitor and notary public, master  
extraordinary in chancery, commissioner taking affidavits for  
and solicitor to the Shoreham & Sussex Marine Assurance  
Association, local solicitor to the Board of Inland Revenue and  
advocate in the county courts, Brighton District, 63 Middle Street.

Bennett and Housman seemed to specialise in acting for local tradesmen who had gone bankrupt, an area of the law in which William Housman was indeed an expert. By April 1851, Housman had moved into Sidney Bennet's house, for on the census returns he is listed at 63 Middle Street, Brighton, aged 57, living, with his wife Mary, aged 52, and their children Lucy Agnes, 24; Helen Agnes, 22; and Henry, 19. Also with them at this time was Mary's brother, the Rev. John Vernon, Rector of Shrawley, Worcestershire. Their son Henry was at first intended for a legal career and in June 1851 he was made an articled clerk to his father for five years. That same month, however, William Housman's creditors were closing in and the following advert appeared in *The Times*, 23 June 1851:

Valuable life policies in the Argos and the Promoter Life Assurance Office by order of the executors of the late Charles King deceased. Mr Furber will sell by auction at the Mart on Thursday June 28 at 12 for 1 a policy on the life of Henry Gompertz Esq in the Argos for £600 and another on the life of William Housman Esq of Brighton in the Promoter Life Office to secure £1,000

On the 16 September 1851, the following report appeared in the *Sussex Advertiser*:

Re William Grix. This insolvent came up for examination on his schedule. His case excited a great deal of interest, from his having occupied a most respectable position as a schoolmaster in Brighton ... The grounds of opposition were an insufficient

schedule, concealment of property, imprudent and extravagant expenditure, and undue preference ... The insolvent displayed much agitation, and in tremulous tones stated that his school and family had been afflicted by scarlet fever, and that was the cause of his present unfortunate position ... I did not call my creditors together because my solicitor, Mr Housman, advised me not. He expressly advised me to make an assignment to pay off a loan I had from an insurance office. I made that assignment, but before the ink was dry on that, Mr Housman wished me to sign an assignment for the benefit of creditors, appointing Mr Hannington and others as trustees. He also advised me to keep out of the way, but I refused to do that, and placed myself in the power of the Court. I found afterwards that Mr Housman did not pay the money over to the insurance office as he ought to have done, and then I did the best for the creditors. If Mr Housman had had the handling of the money, the creditors would have had nothing (laughter). The date of the assignment was the end of July or early August. Mr Housman went to the auctioneer. I can't tell how long it was between the assignment and the day of the sale. Mr Ridley was to pay the taxes and the servants' wages out of the proceeds of the sale and hand the balance over to me, but I did not call upon him for it ... The assignment to Mr Erridge and Mr Haddon was made because they paid off the sum of money borrowed from the insurance company ... I borrowed £350 from the Insurance Society. That cost me £50 for the premium and the policy. I did not know that I was then insolvent ... Mr Housman said it was my first duty to save Mr Erridge and Mr Haddon for the money received from the Insurance Office went to my creditors.

Mr John Coote Haddon sworn. I was joint surety with Mr Erridge for the payment of the £350 to the Insurance Office. I had three boys at Mr Grix's school and when I became surety I owed Mr Grix £100. When I heard an assignment had been made to Mr Erridge, I went down to Brighton, and with Mr Erridge and Mr Grix, proceeded to Mr Housman's office. We pressed

Mr Housman to attend to the matter immediately. I felt that if the bond business was not settled I should have to pay twice.

Mr Aukland. At that time had Mr Housman any money in his possession? I could not get any money of him. I met Mr Housman at the Consolidated Insurance Office, when he gave me a check, post-dated, for £186 8s 6d. He brought his banker's book to show me that he was a respectable man, and yet he post-dated a check. Did Mr Housman pay you any money at all? No. Did Mr Housman collect all the debts under the assignment from the insolvent to Mr Erredge? I sent a letter to Mr Housman desiring him to pay the money to me, but I found that although he collected the debts, I could not get any money out of his hands. I understood the amount assigned was £471 6s 6d. Mr Housman paid £166 by the check leaving a balance due to the Office of about £51. I also understand that Mr Erridge stopped Mr Housman from getting £103. Mr Housman said he had paid the servants' wages which I believe to be untrue. I have heard this morning that there is a reward out for his discovery ...

Insolvent. It was all Mr Housman's fault.

In the London Gazette of 7 October 1851, William Housman's own bankruptcy was announced. He was described as William Housman, of Middle Street, Brighton, in the county of Sussex, money scrivener. A report of his first hearing in bankruptcy appeared in the *Sussex Advertiser*, 18 November 1851

Court of Bankruptcy, Thursday. – Before Mr Commissioner Holroyd. In re Housman. This was the last examination meeting in the case of W. Housman, scrivener, of Brighton. The bankrupt had not surrendered, and is supposed to be out of the country. His debts are estimated at between £2,000 and £3,000; assets uncertain. Mr Lucas, for the assignees, took objection to some proofs, which were directed to be amended.

The bankrupt was ordered to be proclaimed in the usual way. A private meeting was appointed to inquire into the right of Mr and Mrs Harrop to hold certain deeds, over which, it was contended, the bankrupt had a lien.

It is clear from these newspaper reports that William Housman had more pressing matters on his mind than any relationship with an actress. It is not clear where he went in September 1851, but he may have returned to the Channel Islands where his uncle John Adams had associates.<sup>10</sup> When John Adams made his will, 29 July 1854, he left money for the children of William and Mary Housman. As for his nephew, he stated: "I do not make any provision for my said nephew William Housman owing to my sense of the great impropriety of his conduct."

In 1856, there was enough money for William Housman's son Henry to go up to St John's College, Cambridge. There is no sign of William Housman on the 1861 census, but his wife Mary is listed as a married woman, living with her daughters Mary and Lucy and two servants at 2 Hereford Road Paddington. William Housman's bankruptcy proceedings dragged on for over ten years. Perhaps the last hearing was reported in the *Brighton Gazette* in November 1862:

Housman's Bankruptcy. This was dividend meeting, and for the proof of debts, under the bankruptcy of William Housman, Middle Street, Brighton, money scrivener. Mr Forster, of Great James's Street, Bedford Row, appeared as Solicitor for the creditors' assignee, Mr Christopher Knight of Southwick, Sussex, gentleman. The bankruptcy took place on the 18<sup>th</sup> September 1851 on the petition of Mr Knight and the bankrupt absconded and has never filed any accounts or statements of his affairs. The total amount of assets received by Mr Edwards, the official assignee, is only £93 14s 4d of which there remains a balance in hand of £46 17s 4d which will yield little or nothing in the shape of dividends to the numerous creditors who have proved their debts against the

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10. Isaac Buxton of Freshford, Somerset, was party to a conveyance of Perry Hall in 1824. He died at Jersey in 1863.

bankrupt's estate.<sup>11</sup>

William Housman appears to have broken cover in February 1865 when Elizabeth Cooper Dickenson, a Southampton clothier and shopkeeper, was declared bankrupt. The local newspaper reported that she had made over her stock to her son Benjamin and 'one William Housman' who had put it up for auction.<sup>12</sup> There is no mention of the proceeds of this sale, but we can guess who pocketed the money.

There is no sign of a will or a death certificate for William Housman, but at census time in April 1871, Mary Housman, then living at 139 Kildare Terrace, Bayswater, described herself as a widow. Their daughter, Lucy Agnes, was married in London to her cousin Edward Housman on 26 June 1873. Mary Housman died at Kildare Terrace, 14 December 1876 aged 78.

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11. *Brighton Gazette* 20 November 1862.

12. *Hampshire Advertiser* 25 February 1865. I am indebted to Pat Tansell for this reference.



## **‘Your affectionate but inefficient godfather’**

### **The letters of A.E. Housman to G.C.A. Jackson**

*David Butterfield*

The largest cache of unpublished Housman letters in a generation was acquired this summer by Trinity College, Cambridge. The collection contains 52 autograph letters written by Housman and sent to his godson Gerald Jackson. The correspondence dates entirely to the last decade of Housman’s life, with letters unevenly distributed across this period as follows: 1927 1, 1928 2, 1929 3, 1930 7, 1931 5, 1932 7, 1933 10, 1934 7, 1935 7, 1936 3.<sup>1</sup> The earliest fifteen letters in this collection, dating from 1927 to 1931, were offered for sale at Sotheby’s New York on 14 December 2015.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, the lot did not sell and Trinity College were instead able to purchase that set along with a further 37 letters in the possession of the Jackson family. The collection now resides in Cambridge and is available for consultation by interested parties.<sup>3</sup> For this windfall all Housman enthusiasts will be grateful, both to the Jacksons for bringing these letters to public attention and to Trinity College – most particularly its new and energetic Wren Librarian, Dr Nicolas Bell – for seeing the importance of obtaining the letters and placing them permanently within the institution from which they were written.

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1. The dates of these letters are as follows: 19 May 1927, 14 Feb. 1928, 4 Aug. 1928, 2 May 1929, 19 Sep. 1929, 6 Nov. 1929, 5 Feb. 1930, 10 Feb. 1930, 2 Mar. 1930, 15 Jul. 1930, 15 Oct. 1930, 22 Oct. 1930, 7 Nov. 1930, 10 Feb. 1931, 6 Jul. 1931, 22 Jul. 1931, 21 Sep. 1931, 22 Oct. 1931, 6 Apr. 1932, 17 Jun. 1932, 16 Aug. 1932, 30 Sep. 1932, 20 Oct. 1932, 13 Nov. 1932, 29 Dec. 1932, 27 Feb. 1933, 28 Mar. 1933, 26 Apr. 1933, 27 May 1933, 10 Jun. 1933, 13 Sep. 1933, 25 Sep. 1933, 14 Oct. 1933, 30 Nov. 1933, 26 Dec. 1933, 18 Jan. 1934, 22 Jan. 1934, 31 Mar. 1934, 28 May 1934, 13 Sep. 1934, 15 Oct. 1934, 31 Dec. 1934, 12 Mar. 1935, 16 Mar. 1935, 5 Apr. 1935, 25 Jun. 1935, 17 Aug. 1935, 27 Sep. 1935, 5 Dec. 1935, 6 Jan. 1936, 17 Jan. 1936, 31 Jan. 1936.

2. The details of the sale, and an image of some of the letters and envelopes, may be seen at <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/fine-books-manuscripts-americana-n09435/lot.62.html> .

3. The collection bears the classmark Add. MS a 551, and is arranged in two boxes in chronological order. For a brief account of how Trinity learned of and acquired the collection, not least through the helpful prompting of this society’s own Linda Hart, see the *Housman Society Newsletter* 44 (Sep. 2016) 15-17.

Although the earliest of these letters dates to 19 May 1927, its content and relaxed tone make clear that earlier correspondence existed between the two. Housman makes reference to a letter from Gerald Jackson of 24 March of that year, but that letter – like all of his letters to Housman, it seems – is now lost. However, at least five further letters survive from Housman to Gerald. One, a note accompanying Housman's Leslie Stephen Lecture, will be mentioned below. Three others, one from 1925 and two from 1934, were sold at Sotheby's to an unknown buyer on 18 June, 2010.<sup>4</sup> Their high sale price, of \$5,000, was doubtless buoyed by the fact that this trio followed the remarkable lot containing seven letters of Housman to Moses Jackson, two to his wife Rosa, and the last letter of Moses to Housman, a set that realised \$31,250.<sup>5</sup> If, as may be the case, both of these lots were purchased by manuscript dealers, one may hope that it is only a matter of time before they reach an institutional archive, perhaps to sit alongside the rest of the collection at Trinity. At least one further letter remains with the Jackson family.

Although it is not yet possible to analyse quite all of Housman's letters to Gerald Jackson, one can reproduce from the Sotheby's catalogue the beginning and end of the earliest known letter, of 9 November 1925, written while Gerald is studying in Canada:

My dear Gerald,

I was glad to hear of your proceedings and plans, and I think your probably are doing the best thing. If you find yourself at all straitened for money at the University [of British Columbia], I hope you will apply to me. A little often makes all the difference between comfort and discomfort...

My troubles were in flying back from Paris to London: on reaching England we met such wind and rain that the machine had to make a forced landing in Kent; we got to Croydon at 7.30 instead of 3, and I only reached Cambridge at midnight.<sup>6</sup>

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4. <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2010/books-manuscripts-n08646/lot.42.html> .

5. For details of this correspondence, see especially the article of Gerald's son, Andrew Jackson, 'A pivotal friendship', *HSJ* 36 (2010), 45-53.

6. These difficulties of travel during Housman's return trip from Paris in September 1925 were previously unknown. In a later letter (17 Jun. 1932), by contrast, Housman closes by observing that 'pilots have become much more clever and accomplished, and can fly above clouds and even through them without losing their way, so that one is not in constant danger of hitting trees and knocking off tall people's

Most people in this College have been dying or  
marrying this year, but I have escaped hitherto.

Your affectionate godfather

A.E. Housman

Although this is the oldest letter that is known to survive from Housman to his godson, we can be certain that earlier letters existed: in Housman's celebrated letter to Moses Jackson of 19 Oct. 1922, he records that 'Gerald writes to me now and then, and seems to be a wonder in the way of industry and determination' (*Letters* I.517). It would probably not be too rash to assume that occasional letters had also been exchanged between the pair in Gerald's teenage years as well as his twenties.

The extant collection of correspondence between Housman and his godson is sufficiently varied and interesting to deserve self-standing publication, along with a general introduction and running editorial comment.<sup>7</sup> In advance of that work being done, the purpose of this article is only to give a general picture of the character of this newly available correspondence.

Gerald Christopher Arden Jackson (1900-78) was born in Karachi, India, to Moses and Rosa on 13 March 1900.<sup>8</sup> Moses duly asked Housman to be godfather to his fourth and youngest son; despite his lack of religious beliefs at this stage of his life, Housman agreed to accept the honour. Gerald, like his three older brothers Rupert (1890-1974), Hector (1892-1920) and Oscar (1895-1974), was sent to England for his education, at Branksome School in Godalming, Surrey. Although his mother Rosa settled in the town in 1906, Moses did not move there until 1910. Soon after, in 1911, the Jacksons emigrated to Applegarth, a farm near Vancouver, Canada, where Moses would remain until his death in 1923. Gerald was from this point schooled at home by Moses, a simple option that was in due course necessitated by hats.' For a survey of Housman's engagement with early flight, see Jeremy Bourne, 'Housman in the air', *HSJ* 23 (1997) 42-5.

7. A brief and elegant survey of the collection has already been given by Edgar Vincent, 'With affection', *TLS* 30 Sep. 2016, 16-17. Further details are provided by the blogpost of Nicolas Bell, 'Bromide and champagne: a new glimpse of Housman at Trinity', <https://trinitycollegelibrarycambridge.wordpress.com/2016/10/07/bromide-and-champagne-a-new-glimpse-of-housman-at-trinity/>.

8. For details of the Jackson family I am especially indebted to Andrew Jackson, *A Fine View of the Show; Letters from the Western Front* (Lulu, 2009), esp. 10-14 and 251-5.

World War I. After the troubles of the war had subsided, Gerald entered the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, where he obtained a BSc. in Geology (1924) and subsequently an M.A.Sc. in Mining Engineering (1926).<sup>9</sup>

In 1926, both Gerald and Oscar travelled to Africa to work the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt. Gerald was employed as a geological field mapper, first with Rhodesian-Congo Border Concession Ltd and then with the Roan Antelope Company, while his brother operated as a metallurgist. It is during this period of lively and enterprising activity in N'Changa, North Rhodesia, that the Trinity letters begin. The first item, dated 19 May 1927, will give a good sense of the easy and diverse nature of the correspondence:

My dear Gerald,

I have your letter of March 24 and am glad that lions and influenza have not made an end of you. I have never had influenza yet, but shall probably have it to-morrow.

I am interested to hear of your intentions about taking a research degree and possibly coming to Cambridge. Of course I should be glad to see you here, but it is no good asking my opinion and advice, which are valueless, as I stick to my job and know hardly anything about research studies here. Do not call [Tressilian Charles] Nicholas [1887-1989] a Professor: he may perhaps become one some day, if he is good, and so may you; but Professors do not grow on every bush.

The eclipse of the sun on June 29 has evidently been arranged by Rupert, and Hartlepool is to be the most eclipsed spot.<sup>10</sup> North Wales will be sprinkled with Fellows of Trinity sleeping out on mountain tops; but these are youngish men, who want to be able to tell lies about it in their old age to a generation which did not witness it; and I cannot expect to live long enough for that. Most of June I shall spend with old friends in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire, and at the end of August I expect to go on a

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9. The thesis for his Masters of Applied Science, *The Geology and Structure of the West Kootenay Composite Batholith*, may be viewed and read online at <https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/831/items/1.0052890>.

10. Rupert, then aged 36, was practising as a doctor in West Hartlepool, where he lived not only with his wife Marguerite but also with his mother, Rosa, who had returned from Canada after the death of Moses in 1923.

motoring tour in Burgundy.  
I hope you will keep well, and not fall out of your aeroplane  
on to geological objects, however attractive.

Your affectionate godfather  
A.E. Housman

My godfather is now 88, so it is not an unhealthy profession.<sup>11</sup>

Like every other letter in the collection, Housman writes from Trinity College, addressing his godson as ‘My dear Gerald’ and closing with ‘Your affectionate godfather’.<sup>12</sup> The letter is also representative in showing direct concern about Gerald’s career development – here a move to study at Trinity College itself is mooted – as well as keeping him abreast of general life in England. The wheels of the Trinity plan continued to turn in the following year: on 4 Aug. 1928 Housman reported to Gerald that Nicholas ‘has kept a table for you in the laboratory’. Echoing his earlier comment about his godfather, John Wollwright, Housman adds: ‘My godfather, in whom I hope you take a proper interest, is 89 and quite in good health, but losing his memory; so be prepared for my mental decay in 20 years’ time.’<sup>13</sup>

On 2 May 1929 Housman thanks Gerald for his enclosure of a photograph taken in Africa (now lost but presumably then placed on Housman’s mantelpiece in K8 Whewell’s Court), adding that it ‘made you look rather thin; though I suppose that is the right condition for a hunter, and perhaps for a geologist.’ The letter closes mischievously: ‘The Times has been printing snapshots of lions in the jungle. In one of them they were eating something, and I feared it might be you, but it was more like a zebra.’

The Africa episode did not last more than three years, for Gerald returned to England in 1929, as he had reported he would, to write up the results of his fieldwork. For some reason (more probably the unsuitability of the research project rather than his having contracted malaria)<sup>14</sup> it did

11. This, and subsequent quotations from the letters, are reproduced with the kind permission of the Master, Fellows and Scholars of Trinity College, Cambridge. I am most grateful to Nicolas Bell for being so accommodating in making the collection readily accessible.

12. The letter is one of only five items (two being postcards) in the collection that lacks its original envelope; the remainder preserve this accompaniment, often providing insight into Gerald’s frequent movements by the one – or two – postal redirections required to reach him.

13. In the next letter, Housman offers the last of his trio of remarks about Wollwright: ‘My godfather has died at the age of 88, so you must expect to lose me in 18 years’ time.’

14. In the subsequent letter, of 6 Nov. 1929, Housman ends by saying ‘I hope the

not prove possible for him to pursue his study at Cambridge; instead he enrolled at the Royal School of Mines, which since 1907 formed part of the Department of Geology at Imperial College, London. Housman's letter of 19 Sept. 1929 deals sensitively with the apparent blow this has dealt Gerald:

I am extremely sorry that this vexatious trouble has come upon you. I hope you will find at the Royal School of Mines all that you require, and I suppose there is no doubt that you will. They say there is no cloud without a silver lining, and we may hope that it will not be two years, as it would have been, before you sit again at the table in our Combination Room.<sup>15</sup>

Now at last in the same country, Housman was in a position to invite Gerald frequently enough to lunch, dinner or a brief stay at Trinity. Nevertheless, it seems that a compromise arrangement was reached such that Gerald could spend a few months of his doctoral study at Cambridge. Although in mid-October 1930 Housman expresses disappointment that Gerald will not be coming to Cambridge that Michaelmas, by late October Gerald has moved to a private address in the city, and by early November is resident in Trinity College itself. His room, B3 New Court, is that typically given to a visiting student from Harvard holding the Fiske Scholarship; it is possible that the set was unoccupied for that Michaelmas Term, if not a larger portion of the academic year. Although living simultaneously in the same college, godfather and godson probably saw little of one another: they could not take college meals together (see n.15), and there is no academic or social event at which their paths could have been expected to cross. To forestall the effects of this separation imposed by their differing status, Housman wrote on 7 November:

When once you are admitted it will not be possible for me to ask you to the High Table, so will you come and dine with me in Hall on Monday, the first day I have free: and I will ask [D.A.] Winstanley [Senior Tutor 1925-31] to put off your fall in the social scale till afterwards.

After this term in Cambridge Gerald returned to Imperial College Hostel in London, with Housman taking the initiative to settle up the

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malaria is put right'. No further reference is made.

15. The implication is that, if Gerald did enrol at Cambridge, as a student *in statu pupillari* he could not dine with Housman or combine with him over a period of multiple years; as a student elsewhere he could do this whenever he should be invited as a guest.

previous term's bill.<sup>16</sup> Offering further assistance, on 10 Feb. 1931 Housman forwarded a couple of articles on Rhodesian mines clipped from the *Times* of 9-10 February, which Gerald could have overlooked while deep in research. These cuttings remain enclosed with the correspondence. In July 1931 Gerald completed his doctorate (DSc.) in Mining Geology; a period of only two years was required because one year's credit was given for his graduate work at UBC.<sup>17</sup>

Amidst other minor pieces of general news – about the weather, nature, his travels, his health, the Jackson family – Housman is frequently keen to give direct, and certainly paternalistic, advice to Gerald when he can. The letter of 15 October 1930 closes with some 'Advice from a godfather':

Don't add 'M.A.' in addressing a letter: I don't know why, but it is not the custom. Don't say 'I *will* have to work' when you mean 'I *shall*'. But I never could teach you your catechism.<sup>18</sup>

Your affectionate though inefficient godfather

A. E. Housman<sup>19</sup>

After the completion of his doctorate, Gerald found that the grim consequences of the Great Depression closed off most desirable career avenues. He also seemed in pressing need for financial support. Aware of his troubles, Housman writes to him on 12 Sept. 1931 to express his regret that Gerald was seeking to pay his own way: 'I am sorry that you have been too smart for me over your College account, especially as you are apparently going to starve for want of a job.' In the following month, a letter of 22 Oct. 1931 makes clear what financial support he is able to give: 'If in these times you find yourself in straits I hope you will apply to me, unless we have a Labour government, in which case I should be unable to do anything for anyone.'

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16. Edgar Vincent (as n.7) cites this letter, which still remains in the possession of the Jackson family. Housman goes on to provide the striking explanation for his motivation: 'If you could have any idea of what my feeling for your father was and still is you would not grudge me the pleasure.'

17. The results of the thesis, 'The Geology and Ore-deposits of the *N'Changa* Mine and District, Northern Rhodesia', were published in various abridged forms in 1932-3 (see below).

18. This is one of several playful references in the correspondence to the Catechism, which a godfather is expected to teach his godson; for a more literary instance, see the close of this article.

19. A letter of 6 Jul. 1931 offers the back-handed compliment, 'I like your typewriter than your fountain pen.'

During this hiatus Gerald succeeded in publishing the work that emerged from his thesis (n.17). Since such papers entered the orbit of academia, albeit in a field far removed from Housman's spheres of knowledge, his godfather kept up a keen interest in his progress. Three pieces of Jackson's work, each inscribed to Housman, survive in the Sparrow Collection at St John's College, Oxford, although none bears annotations.<sup>20</sup> On 6 April 1932 he expresses his pleasure at the report of one of Gerald's papers being read before the Geological Society. Nevertheless, he cannot resist adding: 'The vocabulary, like the English army at Bannockburn, was "gay yet fearful to behold".' Inspection of these works does indeed turn up spectacular technical terms that would be sure to raise Housman's eyebrows: 'manganiferous', 'granulitization', 'birefringence', 'schistosity', 'auto-scapolitization'. On receipt of a copy of Jackson's thesis, Housman expressed further views in a similar vein (17 Jun. 1932): 'Thanks for sending me your able and convincing monograph, full of beautiful new words, both long and short, of which my favourite is ong.'

In mid-1932 Gerald spent a few months in Spain working for the British mining company Rio Tinto (later Rio Tinto Zinc) but failed to find permanent employment there. Once he had returned to England, he became attached to the First Battalion of the Irish Guards, stationed at Pirbright Camp, Woking. As Housman wrote to him on 16 Aug. 1932: 'how you attached yourself to the Guards, and why it is the Irish Guards, are mysteries which I will not trouble you to explain.'

At some stage amidst these diverting experiences Gerald decided to change careers into medicine, just as his brother Rupert had. Housman writes on 30 Sep. 1932 to say that he will support his studies, and in a letter of 20 Oct. 1932 he states his position more explicitly:

It will be best for you to write to me at the beginning of each year telling me as well as you can what you require until the next; and this, if present circumstances do not become worse, I shall be able to send you annually. But if I die, this will not continue. I am just making a will, in which I am leaving you three hundred pounds and directing that my debts due from you to me at the time of my death are to be forgiven you.<sup>21</sup>

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20. 'The *geology* of the N'Changa district of Northern Rhodesia', *Journal of the Geological Society of London* 88 (1932) 443-515; 'The ores of the N'Changa mine and extensions, Northern Rhodesia', *Journal of Economic Geography* 27 (1932), 247-80; 'Outline of the geological history of the N'Changa district, Northern Rhodesia', *Geological Magazine* 70 (1933) 49-57.

21. Alongside this letter in the collection there is a later copy of it, presumably made by Gerald himself, perhaps for legal reasons. Housman did indeed leave



In the absence of Moses Jackson, who had entrusted him with the role of godfatherly support, Housman steps with confidence into the role of a familial patron. Buoyed by this financial aid and pastoral encouragement, Gerald enrolled that month at the Medical School of St Thomas's Hospital, London. This was an expensive process, requiring £450 *per annum* for Housman to support, a significant sum that was presumably otherwise not available from other quarters.

For the remainder of Housman's life Gerald was busied with his medical studies in London. Nevertheless, the correspondence reveals that he came to visit Housman in Cambridge often enough in this period, and they exchanged genial updates about the events of their life. A letter of 27 Feb. 1933 shows some of the curious topics that crop up. Housman offers the intriguing comment, 'I am sorry that the Cambridge men at St Thomas's are 'very bisexual', but perhaps that is only your handwriting.' The letter goes on to reveal a rare sign of his engagement with affairs on the River Cam, a major part of undergraduate life otherwise not reflected in his correspondence. Housman presumed, perhaps rightly, that Gerald, as the son of the ardent oar Moses, would be interested in such matters: 'The Lent races are just over, in which Third Trinity was bumped by Fitzwilliam Hall, a disgrace unknown in history.' In the following month (28 Mar.), he reports: 'The bronze Hermes in Whewell's Court had his body painted black and his face yellow on the last night of term; but it took only a few hours to get the stuff off.' As a former Trinity man, however briefly, Gerald is treated to College gossip of this kind in a way that few other correspondents are.

Later that year a major event loomed for Housman, his Leslie Stephen Lecture, 'On the Name and Nature of Poetry'. In a letter of 26 April Housman sends Gerald a ticket of admission to the Senate House. However, he advises his godson against attending, observing, 'I don't much think you would be much interested.... you would find reading it less boring, and I can give you a copy.' Evidently Gerald took the hint: a letter of 20 May 1933, the only letter to him that has hitherto been published in full (*Burnett* II.348), accompanied his printed address: 'Here is the lecture. I am not going to catechise you on it [cf. n.18], so you are not obliged to read it.' This letter, which had been tipped in to the book, was sold at Sotheby's on 6 Nov. 2001, when it was inspected by Archie Burnett for his edition.

With the distraction of this major lecture out of the way, Housman advises Gerald a week later (27 May) to stay on with his medical course:

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£300 to Gerald in his will, as well as the provision that any debts be forgiven. For the text, see P.G. Naiditch, 'A.E. Housman's last will and testament', *HSJ* 36 (2010) 60-3, at 60.

As far as I can make out, I should say it would be more prudent to keep on at your medical course instead of taking up a job at geology which does not promise permanency. But of course you have to reckon with the possibility that I may die, in which case, as I told you, my assistance would come to an end.<sup>22</sup>

It seems that, although Gerald enjoyed his medical studies, the sheer length of the course was punctuated by thoughts of other possible careers. Alongside the option of further mining work, Gerald applied for several posts with the Colonial Office: these letters reveal that he performed well in applications for at least two positions, in Iraq and Kenya, but did not secure appointment.

In 1933 Housman had a spell of ill health, and details of his ailments are carefully passed on to Gerald, who was earning his stripes in the medical world:

In the hot weather in the beginning of June I spent a week in a nursing home, because the doctor said my heart was all over the place. It has behaved properly ever since... an oculist to whom I went to-day about new spectacles says that my eyes are very good. (10 June)

I am very feeble both in body and mind. (25 Sep.)

My health comes back very slowly, if at all. (14 Oct.)

Nevertheless, throughout this period Housman does not lose his keen concern for Gerald's wellbeing:

For goodness sake do not go starving yourself or depriving yourself of proper amusement, if you do it will react on your work. (30 Nov.)

By 1934 Housman is back in fine fettle. On 18 Jan. he comments: 'The eating and drinking of Christmas did me no harm, and the 52 oysters I consumed on Dec. 31 rather did me good.' A few days later, on 22 Jan., he clarifies the matter with some satisfaction: 'When you ask 'how many meals the 52 oysters represented' you betray some meanness of conception. They constituted the one meal of supper.'

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22. The same attitude reappears later, on 12 March 1935: 'As to the point you want my advice on, I think it would be a pity to break off your medical education unless a really good offer in the mining world came along.'

By late 1935 Housman's poor health has returned, and he has moved across Trinity St into B2 Old Court. On 5 Dec. 1935 he writes:

My walking is weak and slow, and for getting to sleep I am using diminishing doses of a bromide, supplemented with champagne; but I still wake too early in the morning and pace a disagreeable hour or two. The clock does not annoy me at all.<sup>23</sup>

When turning to discuss Gerald's impending 'great examination' in his medical studies, we see Housman at his most supportive and affectionate:

If you fail this time I shall nevertheless be sure that you have done your best. I must tell you again not to worry yourself about the expense, which I can quite well support; and I do not want you to go taking some geological post which is not good enough.

The letter of 7 Jan. 1936 is perhaps the most remarkable in the Trinity collection. It is written in shaky, pencilled hand from Evelyn Nursing Home, but his thoughts are still with Gerald's maintenance:

I shall try to send you a cheque for £450, which if I mistake not is the regular amount [sic] and which I beg you to accept if so without demur, as I can quite well sustain it. My head has sometimes got confused between your family and my nephews [i.e. the Symons boys: cf. n.23].

Despite the uncharacteristic uncertainty and irregularity, the letter closes by thanking Gerald for his visit, and adding that A.S.F. Gow will send the letter, by whose hand the accompanying envelope has indeed been addressed.

Ever eager to return to his former powers, by 17 Jan. Housman is back on his usual form. Wishing to do something nice for the nursing staff, he enlists Gerald as his helper:

Acquainted as you are with Fortnum and Mason and familiar with the female medical soul you are just the man to execute this job. After a stay in Evelyn Nursing Home, where they are always extraordinarily kind and attentive, I send the nurses a present of something to eat, such as strawberries in season, or

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23. Similar remarks are made in his letter to Denis Symons, son of Kate and Edward, of 11 Dec. (*Letters* II.508-9).

boxes of chocolates. Will you expend the enclosed cheque for £2.0.0 in purchasing and having sent from them a selection of sweetmeats (crystallised fruits or anything which you think will be relished, and perhaps not exactly what is most commonly to be found in Cambridge, – though do not be particular about that, as they are all fond of chocolate) addressed to the Deputy Matron and enclosing the enclosed letter [now lost] from me?

The plan was a success, for on 31 Jan. Housman writes, ‘The nurses went into ecstasies over the sweets, and over admiration of your taste.’

On this happy note of reciprocal support between godfather and godson the correspondence ends. Apparently no further letter was sent, and in April that year Housman died. The next letter, had one come, would doubtless have congratulated Gerald warmly on his success in his examinations, serving as validation of the medical studies that Housman had supported with not only financial but almost fatherly support.

A year after Housman’s death, Gerald received his licence to practise, was appointed to the Indian Medical Service on 1 May 1937, and duly became Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) in 1939. In World War II he initially served as a Captain in the Medical Corps of the Indian Army but later joined the Royal Army Medical Corps, attached to a band he knew well, the Irish Guards. After the war Gerald moved back to Africa with his wife Honor Martin, whom he had met in 1943, this time heading for Southern Rhodesia. There he remained until his death in 1978, practising as a successful doctor in Salisbury (later to be renamed Harare). The Housman letters were carefully preserved and passed on to the next generation of the Jackson family, through whose actions the study of A.E. Housman has already been able to profit considerably.

An outlying but entertaining item in the Trinity collection comes from the earliest days of the exchange between Housman and Gerald. An accompanying letter typed by Gerald and dated 25 July 1950 introduces the poem that Housman wrote to celebrate his Christening. The poem survives in the collection in Housman’s hand, which could plausibly date to 1900 itself. First published in Laurence Housman’s *A.E.H.* (1937, 241; see also Burnett, *Poems*, 271), the verses play with the bounty of names that the Christening has bestowed upon Gerald, all with a view to answering the first question of the Catechism, ‘What is your name’?

To his Godson Gerald C.A. Jackson

Aids towards answering the first question of the catechism

When G.C.J. Arden  
Goes out in the garden,  
    To play with the slugs and the snails,  
Their lives are imperilled  
By C.A.J. Gerald,  
    Who treads on their backs and their tails.

Their tails and their backs on,  
Treads G.C.A. Jackson,  
    And each of them squirms and exclaims,  
“Oh G.A.J. Christopher,  
See how I twist over,  
    Under your numerous names.”

## Biographies of Contributors

**Martin Blocksidge** is the author of *A.E. Housman: A Single Life* (2016), as well as books on Samuel Rogers (2013) and Arthur Hallam (2010). He has been Head of English at the Royal Grammar School, Guildford, Director of Studies at St Dunstons College, London, and a former President of The English Association.

**Andrew Breeze**, FSA, FRHistS, PhD, was born in 1954 and has taught at the University of Navarre since 1987. Married with six children, he is the author of *The Mary of the Celts* (2008) and *The Origins of the 'Four Branches of the Mabinogi'* (2009), as well as over seven hundred academic papers and reviews.

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**Julian Hunt** is the younger son of Joseph Hunt, co-founder of the Housman Society. He was educated at King Edward's Five Ways School, Birmingham, and joined the staff of Birmingham Reference Library in 1968. His first book, *Arriving at Dinas Mawddwy*, dealing with the impact of an English landlord on a Welsh village, was published in 1973. In 1976, he became Local Studies Librarian in Oldham, Lancashire. He moved to Buckinghamshire County Library in 1988, and has written *Buckinghamshire's Favourite Churches* for the local Historic Churches Trust and several histories of Buckinghamshire towns. He published his first Worcestershire book, *A History of Halesowen*, in 2004, and is now working on a history of Bromsgrove.

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**Elizabeth Oakley** is the author of *Inseparable Siblings: A Portrait of Clemence and Laurence Housman* (2009). She holds a degree in English from the University of Bristol and an M.A. in Shakespearian Studies from the University of Birmingham. After completing a course in Play Production at the British Drama League she taught English and Drama for several years at Bromsgrove High School. Later she was Head of Drama at The Alice Ottley School in Worcester.

**Peter Parker** is the author of *Housman Country: Into the Heart of England* (2016). He is also the author of two books about the First World War, *The Old Lie* (1987) and *The Last Veteran* (2009). He has written biographies of J.R. Ackerley (1989) and Christopher Isherwood (2004), and has been an associate and advisory editor of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

*The Housman biographies of Martin Blocksidge, Peter Parker and Edgar Vincent (forthcoming, 2017) will be reviewed in next year's issue.*

# The Housman Society and Journal

## MEMBERSHIP

The Housman Society was founded in 1973, its main purpose being to bring together all those interested in the lives and works of the Housman family and to generate interest in literature and poetry. The subscription year starts on 1<sup>st</sup> May and the current annual subscriptions are:

Single Membership (UK)	£15.00
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Members are encouraged to pay their annual subscriptions by Banker's Order and sign a Gift Aid declaration. All membership correspondence should be addressed to the Treasurer, Peter Sisley, Ladywood Cottage, Baveney Wood, Cleobury Mortimer DY14 8HZ.

## THE JOURNAL

The Journal, which is published annually and sent free to members, exists for the publication of critical researches related to the poetry, prose and classical scholarship of A.E. Housman and the works of other members of his family, and for the review of books concerned with the same. It also exists for the publication of documentary evidence relating to the family.

The 2017 Journal will be published in December of that year. Articles intended for publication, or books for review, should be sent to **David Butterfield, Queens' College, Cambridge, CB3 9ET**. If possible please send as an attachment to an e-mail, preferably in Microsoft Word, or as a file on a CD-Rom. E-mail: [djb89@cam.ac.uk](mailto:djb89@cam.ac.uk). Proof copies will be sent by PDF.

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The Journal is on sale to the public at £9.50 in the UK and £10.50 overseas. All these prices include postage and packing, surface mail in the case of overseas orders. For copies please contact Mrs Valerie Richardson, 1 Warwick Hall Gardens, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire B60 2AU.



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Articles submitted to the journal are preferred in digital form (ideally in Microsoft Word format and double-spaced throughout) and should be sent either as an attachment to the editor's email address or as a file on a CD-Rom to the editor's postal address (as above). If submission is only possible in hard copy, articles must be typed, double-spaced and paginated. Italic, which should be employed for titles of books and articles, and for quotations and words in languages other than English, is indicated in typescript by underlining. Quotations from other languages, from whatever source, should be enclosed within single inverted commas; quotations should be enclosed within double inverted commas. Greek quotations may be included in articles: if submitted digitally, contributors are asked to state the Greek font they have used; if in hard copy, Greek should be written clearly by hand.

Lines of poetry quoted within a sentence should be indicated by the siglum |; e.g., I to my perils | Of cheat and charmer | Came clad in armour | By stars benign.

Numbers of poems, where appropriate, should be in upper case Roman numerals: e.g., ASL II (not ASL ii).

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