

## Editorial

JCP called Charlie Chaplin a great genius and said that he had an almost religious idolatry for him. He believed he had learnt something from Chaplin about how to pursue an ideal of life for oneself independent of everybody else. When JCP recalled how he had visited Chaplin in Los Angeles on the studio set of *The Pilgrim* in 1922, he remembered the kindness Chaplin showed him and that he had especially noticed his “unbelievably” beautiful hands. Characteristically JCP also remembered how Chaplin had served him the only really *thin* bread and butter he ever had in America. Chaplin appears on our front cover in a publicity still from *The Pilgrim*.

We have two articles about JCP and Chaplin including an interview with JCP, originally published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, in which JCP expresses his views on acting Shakespeare and especially the suitability of Chaplin in the role of Hamlet. Our back cover shows an image of JCP’s favourite actor – Sir Henry Irving.

Members will be very interested to learn of the sale of the Mappowder Powys collection which comes up for auction by Dominic Winter on 14 December 2023. Peter Foss previews the sale of this important and large collection of Powysiana which has remained in private ownership since it was first created by Lucy Penny (née Powys).

Pat Quigley reports on the permanent JCP display at the Corwen museum which he visited during this year’s conference.

We are very pleased to publish for the first time an eloquent tribute to Llewelyn written by a friend of the Powyses, Glyn Griffiths. Glyn met Llewelyn in 1936 and provided hospitality when Littleton was invited to Swansea in 1945 to give a lecture on the Powys family. We have also included a few short but affectionate letters from JCP and Littleton to Glyn and his wife Rowena.

A pertinent letter from Llewelyn, written in 1933, to the Commissioner responsible for road traffic in the south east, finds Llewelyn in a campaigning mood persuasively urging continuation of a local Chaldon bus service which provided vital community support.

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Rachel Hassall writes about Powys wills and bequests; a Coventry based journalist describes a visit with her family to meet JCP in 1958 at his home in Blaenau Ffestiniog.

Finally, we have a collection of contemporary reviews of JCP's books including the historian of esotericism, A. E. Waite, on *Wolf's Bane*; Edward Garnett on *Wolf Solent* and Edwin Muir, Geoffrey West and Compton Mackenzie writing about *A Glastonbury Romance*.

**Chris Thomas**

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**Peter Foss**

***Notification of the Sale of the Mappowder Powys Collection***

The greater part of the Powys collection of books and miscellaneous material currently housed at Mappowder, Dorset, is to be auctioned on **14 December 2023**, by Dominic Winter Auctioneers, Mallard House, Broadway Lane, South Cerney, Cirencester, Gloucestershire GL7 5UG, telephone number 01285 86900. This collection has a profoundly personal relevance to the Powys story and was accumulated over many years by Lucy Amelia Penny (née Powys), youngest sister and god-daughter of John Cowper Powys, who lived in Mappowder from 1950 to her death in 1986. The present owner Louise de Bruin inherited it via Gerard Casey, Lucy's son-in-law.

The collection includes memorabilia from the Powys parents, grandparents and forebears, from the extended family and from the Powys 'circle'. It consists of several hundred family-owned books (for the most part in a much-used condition but with significant inscriptions and insertions), including many inscribed first editions of Powys works. There are also examples of graphic work by members of the family, paintings by Gertrude Mary Powys, a small number of manuscripts and typescripts and much highly significant ephemera. There are also over 700 family photographs (in folders), and over 2000 family letters, including the letters of Mary Casey to and from her mother, Lucy Penny, in the Casey Collection. (Most of the letters are in their original envelopes.)

The auction will take place at South Cerney and there will be viewing days beforehand. A printed catalogue will be published and the collection itemised online, through which bids can be made. Any interest should be directed to Dominic Winter at the above address and telephone number (email: [info@dominicwinter.co.uk](mailto:info@dominicwinter.co.uk) - [www.dominicwinter.co.uk](http://www.dominicwinter.co.uk)).

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**Neil Lee-Atkin**

***Tribute to Paul Gillingham***

It is with a heavy heart and a deep sense of loss that I write to pay a short tribute to my friend & fellow admirer of Llewelyn Powys, Paul Gillingham, who recently passed away in his 80<sup>th</sup> year after a short illness.

For many years Paul was a regular participant in the annual Llewelyn Birthday walk alongside wife Pam and sometimes young Freddie, and as Pam told me recently, "*He thoroughly enjoyed the uniqueness of the occasion*".

Pam also explained: *'In retirement from his career as a journalist, and later the family business 'Gillinghams of Fulham' (a legendary shoe store frequented by royalty and a host of celebrities on Fulham Palace Road) he enjoyed combining his twin hobbies of history and cycling. Paul literally cycled all over the world collecting material for his travel/history talks which he gave throughout the UK. In his time he met many famous people, the Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, Little Richard, Ginger Rogers and Mussolini's son (Romano) to name but a few. He was a natural communicator with a special gift for listening and inviting people to open up about their lives. His writing and talks have given great pleasure to so many people. He championed the human story and made the past fascinating. Paul's links to Dorset and the village of Chaldon go back a long way to his great grandfather who had West Chaldon Farm, and his grandmother walked to the school in Chaldon every day, and his great aunt lived in the Chaldon Manor House. Paul's father was named Theodore, presumably after Theodore Powys who was a near neighbor and known to the family'*.

Thus in retirement Paul's well established ancestral roots were instrumental to our good fortune by bringing the Gillinghams back to Chaldon, for whenever they were in residence at their cottage in the village, Paul and Pam played *mine host* & were delighted to welcome the tired walkers back from Llewelyn's Stone with a sumptuous feast in their lovely garden, accompanied by gallons of tea & coffee, (and lots of my favourite Eccles cakes!)

This late-afternoon tea-party was regarded by all as a special treat, a reward for once again conquering Chalky Knapp, and thanks to Paul & his lovely wife, it always provided a perfect finale to a special day, making it all the more memorable.

Looking back over a quarter of a century to these 'unique occasions', I recall many happy hours in Paul's company. He was the ideal walking companion, erudite and upbeat with a sharp wit, considerate and well informed, and time spent in his company always engendered respect. We shared a passion for history and his enthusiasm for the subject was infectious and I was always impressed by his vast store of knowledge on a whole plethora of subjects.

However, perhaps my most vivid recollection is the most recent one, the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Llewelyn Birthday Walk three years ago in 2020 when Paul's quick thinking beside Llewelyn's Memorial Stone rescued my precious signed copy of *Earth Memories* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.) from being destroyed by a sudden downpour as I was reading from the chapter entitled 'Natural Happiness'. I completed the reading huddled beneath Paul's yellow cycling cape – whilst he was still wearing it! Come to think of it, 'Natural Happiness' seems to me a perfect description of the essence and personality of Paul Gillingham's character, for which he will always be remembered with great affection.



*Paul Gillingham shielding Neil from the rain at Llewelyn's memorial*

## Conference Notes

### Paul Cheshire

I'm still recovering from planet conference. It was a real blast. My head is still buzzing.

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### Marcel Bradbury

Before our annual conference I like to get into a suitable Powysian frame of mind by browsing at random through past copies of the Powys Journal. I am always reminded afresh of the huge variety and of the breadth and depth of past contributions. I usually end up sympathising with the speakers at the forthcoming sessions who may well feel, when faced with an excess of thirty volumes, that there is simply nothing new to say. What a temptation there must be to slink off down an obscure byway, the equivalent of the monograph on Milton's ostler bills.

No such half-hearted papers at the 2023 conference! All five speakers squarely addressed core works. We had insightful talks on aspects of *Porius*, *Wolf Solent*, *The Inmates* and *Rodmoor*; always the sign of a good talk if it leaves you with an impatience to immediately reread the work discussed.

One particular aspect of the talks pleased me. Scholarly neglect or dismissal of John Cowper can lead to an overly inward-looking approach by his enthusiasts, but his work should, and was on this occasion, be compared to writers more usually thought to be part of the canon. Comparisons to Wordsworth, Coleridge, Proust, and even in one talk Wagner, make for particularly thought-provoking sessions.

TFP was represented by readings from his, new to me, early work. Here one felt were the raw materials, the building blocks later more subtly fashioned into his unique works.

Nothing on Llewelyn. One reason may be that, as Kingsley Amis said of some of Tennyson's poems, there is not much to say about his best essays other than 'look at this, good isn't it?' However, one conference talk reflected on a recent 'green' turn in literary criticism. This seems to me to open a door, not only to a new angle on JCP but also Llewelyn. Bookshops are now full of nature writing and if Ronald Blythe can describe Llewelyn as dealing successfully with 'the sensuality of earth and sky' and Richard Adams can link him with Richard Jefferies both being writers who drew inspiration 'principally from nature' then I think and hope there may be scope for future conference discussion of his writings.

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### Chris Thomas

This year's conference was an especially good one. There was a genuine sense of expectation and excitement and an authentic buzz of conversation in the bar, at coffee breaks, and at the breakfast and dinner table. Perhaps it was just because we were all so pleased to return, after an absence of several years, to a familiar location and venue beside the rushing waters of JCP's divine Dee, that everything felt so harmonious.

Perhaps it was just because we all felt energised by meeting colleagues again or meeting and greeting new members. One new member travelled from Barcelona to be with us. Perhaps it was also because it felt so thrilling to catch up with members and hear their thoughts about the Powyses, as well as their latest reading recommendations. Oliver Rimmer talked to me about his study of Margaret Anderson and the *Little Review*, Joe Sentence discussed Proust, Walter Scott and JCP; Marcel Bradbury recommended reading *Pavane* (1968) by Keith Roberts with its Powysian setting in Dorset. I was reminded of Geoffrey Household's *Rogue Male* (1939) set amidst the holloways of Dorset. Marcel also recommended *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) by Annie Dillard who was influenced by Thoreau. I discussed Powysian connections with Thomas Mann, Herman Hesse, Colin Wilson, Colin Stanley's Paupers Press and Adam Daly's *The Outsider Writer* (2012) which has a chapter on JCP. We missed however absent regular conference goers – Timothy Hyman, Louise de Bruin, David Goodway, Richard Graves, and Marcella Henderson-Peal. Perhaps it was because all the lectures set such a high standard that everything went so well. I especially appreciated Colin Laker's helpful analysis of JCP's strange relationship with Wales, his complex changing view of Wales, his use of racial stereotyping, and how this influenced his writing and sense of a Welsh identity; I also liked Paul Cheshire's lucid examination of *Rodmoor* with its connection to English romanticism, Keats and Coleridge as well as relationship to fin de siècle language and themes.

I greatly enjoyed our adventure into the mountains above Llangollen on our free Saturday afternoon when we tried to reach World's End, which JCP called "a retreat for the old gods", and the land of the old chiefs of Powys. It was somewhere here that Phyllis photographed JCP, swathed in a cloak wandering beneath towering limestone cliffs. We saw the caves and dark black pines JCP mentions in his diary when he visited World's End in 1936. On Saturday evening the entertainment of recitations from the early works of T.F.P was introduced by Paul Cheshire and featured lively readings by Kate Kavanagh, Pat Quigley, Kevin Taylor, Julia Mathews, and John Hodgson This was a great success and concluded in a discussion with members of TFP's genius for story-telling.

At the end of the conference, I was gratified to learn that the book sale had raised £295.00. Just to prolong my enjoyment of the conference I reserved two extra nights at the Hand Hotel. On Sunday afternoon I joined colleagues, and visited Rhug chapel on the outskirts of Corwen. After tea at the Rhug estate café on the way back to Llangollen we approached Corwen bridge where there is a good view of JCP's house at Cae Coed. In the evening I met with others for a convivial dinner on the terrace outside the Hand Hotel.

Everything was over all too soon. But now we are planning next year's event and a return visit to another evocative Powysian place, Glastonbury and the Avalonian landscape.

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## Conference Photos



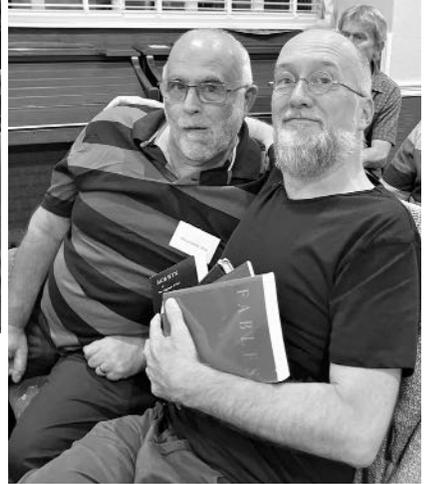
*From left to right: Chris Uren, Eirlys Ashton and Byron Ashton*



*From left to right: Mick Wood, Paul Cheshire, Ben Thomson, Chris Thomas, Taliesin Gore, and Oliver Rimmer*



*From left to right: Marcel Bradbury, Chris Thomas, Julia Mathews and Hilary Bedder*



*From left to right: Chris Uren and Christian Verdú*



*From left to right: Ben Thomson, Taliesin Gore and Oliver Wood*



*Below: Kim Wheatley (Lecturer)*



*Sonia Lewis and John Hodgson*



*Mick Wood (Lecturer)*

## Pat Quigley

The bus from Ruabon sweeps around a corner and the outline of Dinas Bran appears on the skyline, a stone guardian high above Llangollen. The sight lifts the heart, arousing expectation of a weekend's immersion in the written word. It has been four years since the last Powys Society conference in Llangollen, but the creaking wooden floorboards and panelled rooms of the Hand Hotel have a timeless aspect.

A few early members tentatively appear. After a year of conversation via text and screen it is a pleasure to meet again in the flesh. On Friday morning I visit Corwen with literature for the Amgueddfa/Museum and the public library. Mike Wyeth, a museum trustee, enthusiastically describes their acquisition of the "Welsh Crown Jewels" – a replica sword, dagger and crown of Owain Glyn Dwr. I'm delighted to discover the Museum has created two new permanent display cabinets on John Cowper. I love to linger on the paths around Corwen, visit the ancient churchyard and walk the steep path to Cae Coed where the Old's headstone rests under the trees. John Cowper recorded his life here with Phyllis Playter in books, letters and diaries, creating out of words a world that survives the years. Memories fade, technologies come and go, flesh and blood decays but the written word endures.

A Powys conference is a social as well as a literary event. On Friday evening I am greeted by the warm hum of voices in the reception room. This year saw improvements in the lecture room with a microphone and PowerPoint system provided by Chairman Paul Cheshire. Visual images formed a fascinating aid, working best when the texts on screen are short and in large print. The lectures are examples of the variety of approaches that fuel our fascination with the remarkable Powys family. All were delivered with enthusiasm and love for the subject.

This year the lectures focussed on John Cowper, but it may be fruitful to study A.R. (Bertie) Powys, exponent of preservation and conversation of ancient buildings, as important now as in the last century. (His lecture on *The Influence of Arts and Crafts on Architecture* - see *Powys Journal* vol. VI, was downloaded 171 times from JSTOR during the past twelve months). Hopefully Kim Wheatley's new study of John Cowper and Romanticism will be published soon and be promoted with events and talks by the Society.

On Saturday night I participated in readings from T F Powys, whose work appears so simple on the surface, yet strikes deep into the heart of life. His prose resonates when read aloud, such as the sentence starting: "I try to deepen, to broaden, to open my life in every way..."

At one stage I looked around the room and remarked on the absence of so many familiar faces from previous years. They meant continuity in the Society and I hope their absence was temporary. On the positive side there were the new and enthusiastic members. The Bookroom is a staple feature but this year the offerings had for me a déjà vu appearance. The Kenneth Hopkins hoard from last year was scattered. There were stacks of Cecil Woolf monographs, many rarities and very collectible. Maybe some

member with knowledge of selling could suggest ways to market these and create an income stream for the society. The auction of a rare signed copy of *Porius* provided some excitement among bibliophiles and was handled with aplomb by Marcel Bradbury.

The conference seemed barely started when I met people dragging heavy suitcases towards Reception. Between the last lecture on Sunday and lunch, there was barely time to make farewells. Perhaps the hour after the AGM from 12.00 to 13.00 could be reserved for a winding-down session that would segue into an informal leave-taking. Some people remained to enjoy the August sunshine and visit the richly-decorated interior of the Rhug chapel near Corwen. That evening we shared a meal on the Hand's Covid-era decking above the sacred river. Staying on after conference is enjoyable, especially with a visit to the amazing Chirk Castle, but wandering through quiet rooms and corridors so recently full of people can be a melancholy experience.

As always there is much to remember, books and journals to read, memories to savour. A Powys Society conference is an enriching and rewarding experience, one that increases in enjoyment with the years. I look forward to a reunion with that stone guardian overlooking Llangollen again in 2025.

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## **The Powys Society Annual General Meeting** *The Hand Hotel, Llangollen* *Sunday August 20th, 2023*

**Present:** Paul Cheshire (*Chair*), Chris Thomas (*Secretary*), Kevin Taylor (*editor, Powys Journal*), Marcel Bradbury, Kate Kavanagh (*Newsletter editor emerita*), Anna Rosic (*conference organiser*), Dawn Collins (*social media manager*) and some 35 members of the Powys Society.

**Apologies for absence** were received from: David Goodway (*Vice-Chair*), Nicholas Birns (*Hon committee member*), Charles Lock (*associate editor, Powys Journal*), Louise de Bruin (*conference organiser*), Marcella Henderson Peal (*Hon committee member*).

**Apologies for absence** at the AGM were also received from non-committee members Timothy Hyman (*President*) and other Powys Society members: Richard Graves, and Belinda Humfrey

**Hon. Secretary** made a special appeal to members on behalf of our Vice-Chair, David Goodway, and explained that David is unable to drive long distances and asked if anyone who lives nearby to his hometown of Keighley might next year be able to offer to transport him to the conference in Street. Secretary invited members to get in touch with David should this be possible to make arrangements.

**Paul Cheshire read a passage from:** *Owen Glendower*, Overlook edition, p.10, in which JCP describes Rhisiart's first sight of Dinas Bran.

**Minutes of AGM 2022 as published in Newsletter 107 November 2022, and matters arising**

No matters were raised and the minutes were approved.

## **Nomination of Honorary Officers & Members of the Powys Society Committee for the year 2023-24**

Secretary invited members to approve nomination of Honorary officers and members of the committee to serve for the period August 2023 to August 2024 as proposed in NL 109, July 2023, p.10.

Members approved all the nominations.

Secretary invited members to nominate new member of the committee to fill the vacancy left by decease of Robin Hickey

Marcel Bradbury nominated Pat Quigley. The nomination was seconded by Secretary and approved by members.

## **Chair's Annual Report as published in Newsletter 109, July 2023, p.16**

Paul directed the attention of members to his report in Newsletter 109 and especially noted occasions of Powysian outreach to the wider public and gave thanks to all those who have helped to provide advice and support and assisted with administration, promotion and publicity.

## **Acting Treasurer's Report & presentation of annual accounts for year ended 31 December 2022**

Paul directed the attention of members to publication in NL 109 of the Powys Society accounts for the year ending 31 December 2022 including the independent examiners report to the Trustees of the Powys Society. Paul explained our bank balances are set out in the statement of our Reserves Policy in the notes to the accounts. Paul said the accounts are in a healthy state showing there is scope for funding of future projects.

## **Hon. Secretary's Report**

### **Membership**

**Total Membership** of the Society is still 245 (unchanged since last AGM). However, since the last AGM we have registered 21 new members, 5 members resigned, 3 members deceased, 9 members were deleted as they failed to respond to reminders to renew membership). Of the 21 new members 12 are located in UK, 2 are located in Spain, 1 new member is located in the Netherlands, 1 new member is located in Canada, 4 new members are located in USA and 1 new member is located in New Zealand.

**In total:** there are now 193 members registered in the UK, 23 members are registered in Europe, 42 members are registered in ROW (includes 29 in USA/Canada). Membership totals include copyright libraries, complimentary and honorary membership. These numbers show a generally upward trend in membership with significant interest emanating from North America.

### **Donations**

Judy Robinson, who lives in East Sussex and whose parents, Glyn and Rowena Griffiths, were closely acquainted with Littleton and Llewelyn in the 1930s and 1940s, has donated an original sketch of Llewelyn by Gertrude Powys, made in 1920, which has not previously been published. Unfortunately, the sketch is in poor condition. Judy also donated letters to her parents from JCP and Littleton. Secretary said that we plan to transfer the sketch to the Dorset Museum and deposit the letters in the Powys Collection

at Exeter University. Judy later donated to the Society a typescript of a draft of her father's obituary of Llewelyn (also previously unpublished). Judy gave her permission allowing us to transcribe the letters and publish them in a future Newsletter. Judy also donated a small collection of her father's books for sale in this year's book-room at the conference. This includes a copy of the de luxe edition of *Porius* which we are offering for auction at the conference. Judy visited JCP when she was a child with her parents in 1958 and can still recall the impression, he made on her. An article by her mother Rowena about the Powys family and a letter from Llewelyn to Judy's father was published in *Powys Review* 29&30, 1995, p.66-68.

### **Rosemary Hodder**

Rosemary, who manages letting of holiday cottages in East Chaldon and whose family used to run bus services in the 1930s from East Chaldon to places in the surrounding area, has inherited stories about the Powyses in the village as well as letters and items of Powysian interest. Rosemary has donated to the Society a letter from Llewelyn to the Commissioner of road transport in the south east about the possible cancellation of buses serving the Chaldon area. Rosemary has given us permission to publish this letter in the Newsletter.

### **Princeton University**

We have been approached by Princeton University Library who wish to acquire back copies of the *Powys Journal* and also wish to subscribe to the Journal in continuation.

### **The Powys Collection at IMEC**

Jacqueline Peltier's collection of material relating to JCP, Llewelyn and TFP can be accessed at IMEC (Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine) at the Abbey of Ardenne in Caen.

See a description of the collection at:

[https://www.imec-archives.com/archives/collection/AS/FR\\_145875401\\_P1081JCP](https://www.imec-archives.com/archives/collection/AS/FR_145875401_P1081JCP)

IMEC is a French association created in 1988 to gather archival collections devoted to the main 20<sup>th</sup> century publishing houses, journals, writers, historians, philosophers, critics, translators, graphic designers, booksellers, printers, and reviewers, and journalists. Powys Society member Goulven le Brech is Assistant Director of Collections at IMEC and has been invited to give a talk, jointly with Marcella Henderson-Peal, about the collection at next year's Powys Society conference.

### **Newsletter 109**

Secretary said that Jerry Bird died suddenly on 18 June 2023. His funeral service was held on 19 July at Weymouth crematorium. Apart from his important and much valued role as production manager for the *Powys Society Newsletter* and *Powys Journal* Jerry was also a musician, author and composer. Tributes to Jerry were published in *Newsletter* 109, July 2023, p.6.

Secretary said that Jerry died before he had an opportunity to start work on page setting the July Newsletter which meant that we had to quickly secure a new typesetter able to produce the Newsletter at short notice. This was done but at additional costs (£624.00) and with delays to dispatch. *Newsletter* 109 was mailed early August and everyone should have now received their copy.

Secretary said that we would try and secure another professional typesetter willing to produce the Newsletter at a more economic cost in time for November. We will also continue to mail Newsletter to members in the Euro Zone in a way that avoids recipients having to meet demands for payment of a local tax or local duty.

## **Powys Journal**

Kevin said that this year's Journal was mailed well in advance of the conference and hoped everyone had now received their copy. This year copies of the Journal were mailed by a special Premium delivery service but this was expensive and is not sustainable into the future. We plan to experiment with a more targeted and cheaper mailing option in 2024.

## **e-books sales and royalties to end July 2023**

Kevin reported latest figures for sales and royalties:

Revenue: **£8,104.25**

Profit: **£6,139.37**

Total royalties paid to date: **£613.94** (including **£85.92** for 2023 not yet paid)

Unit sales of e-books: **1,567 copies**

July 2023 sales: **26 copies**

Average monthly sales since launch: **28.5 copies**

Bestselling title, *AGR*: **568 copies**

Members asked if there were any plans to publish more e-book titles. Kevin said he has this under consideration and more information will be provided at a later date.

Joe Sentence wondered if the Society had considered producing Talking Books of Powys titles. Joe said that the RNIB might be able to offer help and support. Secretary said that the committee would consider this and contact RNIB and explain proposals.

## **Powys Society website and JSTOR**

### **Website usage**

Paul reported that the website continues to fulfil a vital function for the Society. It shows up on search engines for anyone interested in the Powyses and we continue to get new members signing up online. It is also a good resource for members, with the site search facility accessing back issues of a wide range of Powys Society journals and newsletters. The majority of new members now join online and subscribe by PayPal. In the 2022 calendar year (in round figures) £2,600 of out of a total £5,200 subscription income came via PayPal. This is the first time more than half of our subscription income comes through PayPal.

According to Google Analytics we have had over 4,900 different users in the past twelve months. (4,300 in 2022). 95% of these are new users. This comprises: UK: 49% (2022: 43%), USA 24% (2022: 25%), Rest of World 27% (2022: 34%): 78 countries (82 in 2022) none exceeding 4%. Google analytics is a very helpful tool that enables the website to be kept regularly up to date.

### **JSTOR and the *Powys Journal***

Over the last 12 months, 395 articles have been requested online or downloaded (2022:

447). The top article, The Influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement on Architecture, by A.R. Powys was requested 173 times. The total number of requests for all articles was 3,516. This figure is slightly less than the previous year. We have 80 (2022: 64) members registered as users. The AGM is an opportunity to remind members that they are warmly invited to apply through the Powys Journal home page on our website to receive a username and password.

We have received £1,441 from JSTOR for our annual license fee.

### **Social Media**

Dawn Collins invited members to offer help with management of the Powys Society Facebook page. Oliver Rimmer responded and volunteered to help manage the Facebook page.

Dawn said that an on-line Powys Society Group is already led by Pat Quigley.

Dawn also explained that she also organises meetings of the Facebook Reading Powyses Group which is a free form discussion group of selected Powys texts. Dawn said she hopes to arrange meetings in the future that deal with female writers associated with the Powyses.

Dawn said there also exists an Instagram page dealing with the Powyses though this is not widely used.

### **Date and Venue of conference 2024**

16-18 August. Wessex, Street

Paul noted that next year it may be necessary to request a deposit from members wishing to attend the conference at an earlier date.

Secretary said that plans are already underway to invite speakers to the next conference. Janice Gregory indicated she would like to hear more lectures about the wider Powys family milieu, their friends and associations. Mick Wood said that Sam Wiseman might be a good choice of lecturer. Sam Wiseman is a lecturer in the Dept of English and American Studies at the University of Potsdam, and author of *The Reimagining of Place in English Modernism*, 2015, which has a long section devoted to JCP.

### **AOB**

Secretary reminded members that a meeting has been arranged in London at Pushkin House on 21 October 2023 to discuss chapters 31 and 32 of *Porius* (Overlook/Duckworth edition, 2007). Details can be found on our website.

**Chris Thomas, Hon Secretary**

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### **New Members**

We are pleased to welcome six new members to the Powys Society who have joined since the last announcement published in *Newsletter* 109, July 2023. Our new members are located in Ann Arbor in USA, London, Lewes in East Sussex, Bristol, New Zealand and Canada. This brings the current total membership of the Society to **248**, including Honorary members, and allowing for other members who are deceased, or who have either resigned or not renewed their membership.

**Chris Thomas, Hon. Secretary**



Thus, the ‘Friends of Llewelyn Powys’ have met each year on August 13th for the past 27 years and raised a toast to his memory before walking up to his memorial stone high on Chaldon Down and laying a posy of his wedding flowers, Dandelions, Ground Ivy & Yarrow, and listening to a reading from his work - until this year!

Sadly, for a variety of reasons & uncontrollable circumstances, including last-minute cancellations owing to ill health, it is regrettable that this year for the first and hopefully the only time, what would have been Llewelyn’s 139th birthday gathering was turned into a non-event.

Thankfully several members have already joined me in pledging their support for next year’s gathering when we will meet at the Sailor’s Return in East Chaldon at 12 noon on Tuesday August 13th 2024 to celebrate Llewelyn’s 140th birthday. All welcome! Interested parties can contact me by email at [reblee.tom@gmail.com](mailto:reblee.tom@gmail.com)

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**Chris Thomas**  
***JCP, Charlie Chaplin and Hamlet***

On the morning of 19 October 1922 JCP delivered a lecture on Shakespeare’s Hamlet at the recently opened Plaza Theatre at 80 McAllister Street in San Francisco [1]. The previous day he had been interviewed by a journalist, George C Warren [2], from the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The interview was published in the *Chronicle* on the day of JCP’s lecture and is reproduced here. Warren seems to have found JCP’s opinions on Shakespeare “a bit revolutionary”, especially his idea about Charlie Chaplin in the role of Hamlet, but such ideas were in fact not at all unusual or new.

Chaplin’s association with Hamlet can be traced back as early as 1916 when articles appeared in newspapers across America mentioning Chaplin’s ambition to play Hamlet [3]. Benjamin de Casseres [4] published an article in the *New York Times Book Review and Magazine* (12 December 1920) headed *The Hamlet like Nature of Charlie Chaplin* which seems to have ignited wider speculation about Chaplin’s suitability for the role [5]. In his book *My Trip Abroad*, Chaplin himself described how he was pursued by reporters before he left America for Europe in September 1921. The reporters wanted to know his plans: “Do you want to play Hamlet?” Chaplin replied “Why, I don’t know. I haven’t thought much about it, but if you think there are any reasons why — “ [6]

Other evidence for contemporary popular



*Caricature of Chaplin as Hamlet by  
Alexander King*

interest in Chaplin's Hamlet can be found in the manuscript notes left by the American writer Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938). Wolfe sketched a character he called Dexter Joyner, a representative figure of 1920s aesthetes in America, who he planned to incorporate in a later novel. Wolfe listed Joyner's passing fashionable interests which included the idea of Charlie Chaplin as Hamlet [7]. Chaplin never played Hamlet although he did recite Hamlet's soliloquy To Be or Not to Be when he played King Shadhov in the film *A King in New York* (1957). In his article about Chaplin, in the *New York Times Book Review*, Casseres quotes Chaplin saying: *I am too tragic by nature to play Hamlet. Only a great comedian can play the Dane*. JCP, who declared in *Autobiography* he was a born actor, did play Hamlet in the Shakespearian theatricals he staged at Montacute when he was an adolescent. C. Benson Roberts recalls that in a lecture JCP gave on Shakespeare's tragedies in Bridgend on 1 April 1940 he acted many of the characters in Hamlet (*Recollections of the Powys Brothers*, (1980), p.202). JCP himself told Nicholas Ross, in a letter dated 6 April 1940 that, during this lecture in Bridgend, he *acted a lot of Hamlet*. The Hamlet motif reappears several times in JCP's works – for instance in *Weymouth Sands* and *Wolf Solent*.

It is of course well known that JCP was greatly impressed by Chaplin. C Benson Roberts, the first Chairman of the Powys Society, described Chaplin as one of those figures who were closest to JCP's *heart's affection* (*Letters from JCP to C Benson Roberts* (1975), p.10) JCP admired Chaplin tremendously both as a man, a comic actor, and a symbolic and representative character.

In *Mortal Strife* (1942), p.63 JCP paid a deeply felt personal tribute to Chaplin: *Who is the most Christian as well as the most universal of all artists today? Charlie Chaplin! And why? Because he shows us that the non-recognition of the equality of all souls is the most comical thing there is. Charlie Chaplin, like Cervantes, Rabelais and Dickens, brings down the solemn portentousness of the Great in the light of the beyond-greatness of the commonest living soul. Of that enormous Gravity of Respect for what our poor human race has been humbugged into calling 'greatness' Jesus and Charlie Chaplin call the bluff.*

Clearly JCP hero-worshipped Chaplin. *I have an almost religious idolatry for Chaplin* [8]. In letters to Louis Wilkinson dated 14 December 1955 and 12 May 1959 [9] he counted Chaplin amongst the greatest men he had ever known and in a letter to Violet Powys dated 17 March 1923 he admitted that he disliked all Hollywood people except Charlie Chaplin [10]. JCP left plenty of clues in his *Autobiography* and letters to family and friends that tell us why he felt such a close affinity with Chaplin. They portrayed themselves as outsiders, 'anarchs' and clowns although Chaplin, in his interview with de Casseres, denied he was a clown and said he was really a *mimetic satirist*. In *Autobiography* JCP describes his personal *mania for acting the zany* [11] and describes with relish how as a lecturer in America he played the clown to Arnold Shaw's circus ringmaster. He told Nicholas Ross *I am a born clown* [12]. In a letter to Wilson Knight he referred to himself as a *circus clown* [13]. At one stage Chaplin contemplated making

a film about the life of a clown. Revealingly JCP told Katie in a letter dated 12 December 1957: *I never mind being treated as a Clown or a Fool for I always think of the clowns and fools I love on the Stage like the Fool in King Lear & like Charlie Chaplin* [14]. JCP caricatures himself in *Autobiography* as crazy, loony, childish, naïve, artless and a ninny. In the introduction to the 1967 edition of *Autobiography* J.B. Priestley calls JCP a half comic character and mentions his portrayal as a wise fool whilst Morine Krissdóttir notes *a strong streak of the zany* in JCP's diaries [15].

Chaplin's influence can be detected in JCP's writing: Jerry Cobbold in *Weymouth Sands* is a reflection of Chaplin – he is described as *a famous clown and the greatest clown upon the music hall stage*. In *A Glastonbury Romance* JCP describes Paul Capporelli – a famous old French clown who is cast as Dagonet, King Arthur's Fool, in the Pageant. In *A Glastonbury Romance* JCP also mentions the real music hall comedian Dan Leno. In *Autobiography* he refers to other literary clowns such as Lancelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice* and the characters of the commedia dell' arte such as Pantaloon, Harlequin and Pierrot.

JCP identified with Chaplin's character of the hapless tramp. JCP himself had a natural affection and empathy with tramps: *I have always had an almost hurtlingly strong sympathy with tramps*, he declared in *Autobiography* [16]. He deplored the way American burlesque shows treated tramps in a sardonic, savage and brutal way and declared he wished he had the courage to live like a tramp.

Surprisingly however JCP does not mention in the interview that, whilst staying in Los Angeles, he had actually met Chaplin in person in April or May 1922 when he visited him on the set of his latest film *The Pilgrim* [17] and watched him rehearse and direct some of the scenes. Later looking back on this meeting with Chaplin he remembered how his idol had been very kind to him; he remembered his sense of humour and how he was impressed by Chaplin's beautiful hands [18]. In that brief quarter hour meeting JCP believed Chaplin had taught him two important things - how to achieve a certain ideal of life for yourself independent of everyone else [19] and how to combine clowning with oratory. He said he had learnt more about humour from Chaplin than anything he had derived from Rabelais [20].

The reader will note in the interview JCP's easy familiarity in his references to the stars of the Victorian and Edwardian stage reminding us that JCP had been in his youth a passionate admirer of Henry Irving and seen him perform



*Chaplin in The Pilgrim*

at the Lyceum in London. Wilson Knight however notes that JCP's humility and self-effacing identity suggests a forward-looking modern aspect connecting humour, clowning and anarchism with his love of writing fantasies and fairy stories in his old age: *Powys is modern. He belongs to the age of the 'theatre of the Absurd' and the 'permissive society'. In a pluralistic and directionless universe of unlimited possibility these point, provisionally, ahead; to the change of consciousness of the Aquarian age adumbrated by Powys's books* [21].

JCP's desire to see a modernist or what he calls a cubist interpretation of Hamlet is a remarkable confession.

## Notes

1.JCP's agent Jessica Colbert no doubt arranged the interview to help boost interest in JCP's lectures. She worked for the San Francisco Stage Guild under the management of Sam Hume, Director of the Greek Theatre at the University of California, Berkeley. The Guild had launched the Plaza (previously the Savoy), as a dedicated venue, on 4 October 1922, with a production of Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett*. Other productions, before the project was forced to close, included plays by A. A. Milne, Shaw and Ibsen. Jessica planned to arrange a production of JCP's play *Paddock Calls* at the Plaza but this never happened. See the introduction to *Paddock Calls* (1984) by Charles Lock and JCP's *Autobiography* (1967), p.529

2.George C Warren was the correspondent for stage, screen and music at the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

3.See for instances articles in *The Evening World*, 19 February 1916; *The Chicago Daybook*, 15 March 1916; *Daily Ardmoreite*, 24 March 1916; and the *Ashland Tidings*, 18 June 1917.

4.Benjamin de Casseres (1873-1945), American journalist, critic and essayist, was a friend of both Llewelyn and JCP. In his article Casseres remarks: *there is no man I have ever met who comes nearer to the Hamlet-type than Chaplin* and called him a *planetary clown*...

5.See the *Columbus Dispatch*, 7 December 1921. *The River Falls Journal* on 30 November 1922 reported that Buster Keaton also intended to play Hamlet!

6.*My Trip Abroad*, Charlie Chaplin, 1922, p.5

7.See *Thomas Wolfe's Purdue Speech: "Writing and Living"*, 1964, p. 86.

8.*Autobiography* (1967), p.475

9.*Letters of John Cowper Powys to Louis Wilkinson*, 1958, p.338; NL77. p.34

10.NL70, p.24

11.*Autobiography*, p.641.

12.*Letters to Nicholas Ross* (1971), p.129

13.*Powys to Knight* (1983), p.61

14.*Letters to Sea Eagle*,1996, p.290. In an essay called *The Comic Spirit in the Novels and Fantasies of JCP*, in the *Powys Review*, No.18, Glen Cavaliero notes: *clowning increasingly predominates in his written fiction*. He calls JCP *a major comic artist* and refers to his attainment of a comic vision.

15.*Descents of Memory*, p.381

16.*Autobiography*, p.276

17.Chaplin's *The Pilgrim* was released in 1923. It was Chaplin's last film with his regular co-

star Edna Purviance and his last film for the First National Film Co. The film was Chaplin's second shortest feature. Chaplin plays an escaped convict who is mistaken for a pastor in a small town. For JCP's meeting with Chaplin see *Autobiography*, p.517. In *Chaplin, His Life and Art*, 1994, David Robinson records that Chaplin filmed *The Pilgrim* between April and July 1922. JCP was in Los Angeles at this time delivering a course of lectures so he had a good opportunity to meet Chaplin. The meeting with Chaplin was probably arranged by JCP's agent Jessica Colbert who seems to have accompanied him on the visit – see *La lettre powysienne*, Autumn, 2016, p.5. JCP liked *The Pilgrim* – he thought it was lively - and later saw other films by Chaplin such as *The Gold Rush*. In the October 1952 issue of *Sight and Sound* magazine the French film historian and critic André Bazin ranked Chaplin's *The Pilgrim* amongst the 10 greatest films ever made alongside other great classic movies such as de Sica's *Ladri di biciclette*, Stroheim's *Greed*, Carné's *Le Jour se Lève* and Renoir's *La Règle du Jour*.

18. Letter to Katie, 12 December 1957

19. Letter to Louis Wilkinson, 14 December 1955, p.338.

20. Letter to Nicholas Ross, 24 September 1955, p.129

21. Powys as Humorist in *Visions and Vices: Essays on John Cowper Powys* by G Wilson Knight, 1990, p.126 and pp.128-129

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**George C. Warren**  
***An Interview with John Cowper Powys***  
**San Francisco Chronicle 19 October 1922**

Poet Boosts Chaplin for ideal Hamlet

John Cowper Powys presents reasons why comedian might be greatest  
Talks of Shakespeare

Says clowns have fine understanding of humanity and irony of life

What would you say to Charlie Chaplin as Hamlet? As the greatest Hamlet of all time? John Cowper Powys, poet, lecturer, essayist, novelist, philosopher, thinker and above all, critic of men, things, books, art, the theatre – John Cowper Powys, individual, thinks Chaplin might be the greatest Hamlet of the ages, and he gives reasons for it.

Powys is giving two series of lectures in the Plaza theatre under the management of Jessica Colbert. One, set for Thursday mornings, deals with “The Evolution of the Drama,” and the other on Monday nights has “Personalities in history” [1] for the theme.

He reaches Shakespeare this morning in his drama course. “Hamlet” being the particular topic for his talk.

**Revolutionary Ideas**

Powys's thoughts on Shakespeare are a bit revolutionary. In a half hour's chat at the Plaza Theatre yesterday he had many things to say of the poet-dramatist and his plays.

“I am quite in accord with Charles Lamb,” he said, “in feeling that Shakespeare is to be read and not acted.” [2] As one reads the plays the imagination, like a mass of clouds, presents the characters and the scenes to the mind's eye as they can never be presented



*Herbert Beerbohm Tree as Hamlet*

in the theatre. One's pictures of them are rather rudely destroyed when they come to performance.

"I am not a believer in the generally accepted idea of Shakespeare as a gentleman who came to a sweet and gentle end. He was a fighter, was continually in brawls and probably retired to Stratford in dudgeon. I like to find the man in his plays and there he is bitter, ironic, savage almost. None of his heroes comes to a peaceful end. There is strife and bitterness for them, tragedy often.

"The Victorian idea of Shakespeare as expressed in Dowden's life of the dramatist is very far away from my belief. I think Georges Brandes [3] has the most complete conception of the poet, with Lytton Strachey in his new book, following closely after him. Strachey has one essay entitled 'On the Heights' [4] which he took from Dowden [5], and in it he pricks the beautiful bubble completely.

Wouldn't it be strange if Brandes' view is the real one – a Danish Jew epitomising the English dramatist? I am very pro-Jew. They are a wonderful race, a strange people." [6]

Then we went on the "Hamlet".

### **Hamlet misinterpreted**

"Hamlet is usually misinterpreted. I think Walter Hampden's Hamlet too sweet and thoughtful, too sentimental. Hamlet was brusque, heavy, bitter with more than a touch of the Mephistophelian in his make-up.

"The best Hamlet I have ever seen was in Germany, strangely enough in Dresden.[7] He was stouter than most of the Hamlets carrying out the Queen's jibes – fat and scant of breath, and he put the satanic side of the character in the forefront.

"Of the English Hamlets I think Beerbohm Tree's [8] the best I remember, with his wife as Ophelia. That was twenty five years ago. Tree was an actor. He submerged his personality in the character he played in which he was very different from Henry Irving, who was Irving always.[9]

"I think I should like to see Hamlet done in cubist style, something like Robert Edmond Jones' Macbeth." [10]

### **Boost for Chaplin**

The coming performance of the tragedy with John Barrymore as the melancholy Dane and Jones scenery was called to Powys's attention. [11]

"That should be interesting" he said. "I believe Barrymore can put the devilish element in Hamlet's character into his performance."

"It seems curious for Barrymore to be playing the classics." I remarked. "He used to be

such a clown. “Ah” from Powys, “clowns have an understanding of humanity. Do you know I believe Charlie Chaplin might make the finest Hamlet of the ages. He has humanity, temperament, skill and puts the irony of life into his fooling.”

Powys may be right. Who can tell? Fifteen or twenty years ago Eddie Foy [12] the chief clown of his day had a passionate desire to play this Shakespearian tragedy. People poked fun at the idea and May Irwin [13] came forward with an offer to be the Ophelia to his Prince of Denmark. But nothing came of the plan except a bit of travesty to one of Foy’s productions.



John Barrymore as Hamlet

### Notes by Chris Thomas

1. JCP’s series of lectures on The Evolution of the Drama took place at the Plaza between 5 October and 14 December 1922 and included lectures on *Prometheus* by Aeschylus, *The Bacchae* by Euripides, *Hamlet*, *Lear*, 18<sup>th</sup> century comedy, Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm*, Strindberg, d’Annunzio, Andreyev and Chekhov. JCP’s course on Personalities in History took place at the Plaza between 23 October and 20 November 1922 and included lectures on Lloyd George, Trotsky, Lenin, Clemenceau and Anatole France. At this time JCP also gave lectures at the Plaza on Psychoanalysis and Morality, on Marriage and Friendship, and the Influence of Psychoanalysis on Literature. Jessica Colbert found other engagements for JCP at the Greek Theatre On Makers of Modern History (Napoleon, Lincoln, Gladstone, Bismarck, Cavour and Lloyd George) and on Great Personalities (St. Paul, Helen of Troy, Dante, Joan of Arc, Queen Victoria and d’Annunzio).

2. See for instance Lamb’s views on acting Shakespeare’s plays in his essay *The Tragedies of Shakespeare Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation*. Lamb noted that *the plays of Shakespeare are less calculated for performance on a stage than almost any other dramatist...the Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted.* (*The Reflector*, No. IV, 1811). For JCP on Lamb see his letter to Louis Wilkinson, dated October 1934, in *Welsh Ambassadors*, p.56; the entry on Lamb in *One Hundred Best Books* and JCP’s essay in *Visions and Revisions*; see also Kim Wheatley’s essay John Cowper Powys and the Genius of Charles Lamb in *Powys Journal*, Vol. XXXI, 2021, pp. 10-31.

3. Georg Brandes, 1842-1927, Danish author and critic. He was an admirer and supporter of the philosophy and writings of Friedrich Nietzsche with whom he exchanged letters in the 1880s. He described Nietzsche’s philosophy as “aristocratic radicalism”. In 1887 Brandes delivered an influential course of lectures on Nietzsche at Copenhagen University. A biography of Shakespeare, *William Shakespeare, A Critical Study*, by Brandes was translated into English by William Archer and published by William Heinemann in 1898.

4. JCP is probably referring to Strachey's *Books and Characters*, published by Chatto and Windus in 1922. JCP may have actually meant to refer to the chapter entitled Shakespeare's Final Period which Strachey had originally presented at a meeting of the Sunday Essay Society in 1903 in which he criticises Edward Dowden (see below) for propagating a sentimental and old-fashioned myth about Shakespeare's so-called mood of reconciliation and serenity in his last plays.

5. Edward Dowden, 1843-1913, literary critic and poet. In his book *Introduction to Shakespeare* (1893) Dowden categorised Shakespeare's last plays, *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*, and *A Winter's Tale*, as 'On the Heights' because he thought in these works *Shakespeare had attained an altitude from which he saw human life in a clear and solemn vision, looking down through a pellucid atmosphere upon human joys and sorrows with a certain aloof-ness or disengagement, yet at the same time with a tender and pathetic interest*. By contrast Dowden called Shakespeare's previous period 'In the Depths'.

6. JCP often referred to his admiration for the Jewish race. On 26 May 1948 JCP wrote to Louis Wilkinson and said *I am pro Jew*. He wrote to Glyn Hughes on 4 May 1957 and said *I've got a mania for Jews*. JCP also fervently maintained a private obsession about his putative Jewish ancestry. *I'm a non-Aryan Jew* he declared to Louis Wilkinson in a letter dated 10 May 1956. He wrote to Hal and Violet Trovillion on 5 December 1956 *maybe I'm a Levite!* For the facts relating to JCP's Livius ancestors see the article by Stephen Powys Marks, in NL37, July 1999: John Cowper Powys's 'great grandfather from Hamburg'.

7. For JCP and *Hamlet* in Dresden see my article: John Cowper Powys: A Letter from Dresden to his brother Littleton, 25 April 1909, *Powys Journal*, Vol. XIX, 2019, Note 6, p.130.

8. Herbert Beerbohm Tree, 1852-1917, appeared as Hamlet in January 1892 at the Haymarket Theatre with his wife, Helen Maud Holt, 1863-1937, in the role of Ophelia.

9. Henry Irving, 1835-1905, actor and manager of the Lyceum Theatre. Irving's Hamlet was a huge popular and critical success in the late nineteenth century. Yeats in his autobiography *The Trembling of the Veil* recalls how his father took him to see Irving's performance with Ellen Terry as Ophelia. JCP said that Irving's acting style was a major influence on his own technique of lecturing. See especially JCP's letter to Nicholas Ross dated 4 April 1961 and Evelyn Hardy's article: JCP: A Tribute and Impression in his 91<sup>st</sup> year, *Aylesford Review*, Winter 1962/1963. In *Autobiography* JCP declared that *I sometimes have felt myself, when I was lecturing, to be acting like Sir Henry Irving*... In a letter to Louis Wilkinson, dated 31 January 1956, JCP said that he had *a mania for Irving*.

10. Robert Edmond Jones, 1887-1954, theatrical scenic, lighting and costume designer. Jones's most famous work for the theatre can be found in his modernist and symbolic designs for the production of *Macbeth* which was staged at the Apollo Theatre in New York in 1921. Jones here incorporated ideas he had learnt from psychoanalysis. He later entered analysis with Jung in 1926/1927 – see article Creativity in the theatre: Robert Edmond Jones and C. G. Jung by Dana Sue McDermott in *Theatre Journal* May 1984. Jones shared with JCP's friend, Maurice Browne an enthusiasm for the innovations in stagecraft undertaken by Max Reinhardt at the Deutsches Theatre in Berlin in the early years of the twentieth century.

11. John Barrymore, 1882-1942, stage, screen and radio actor, brother of Lionel and Ethel Barrymore. Barrymore's 1922 "*Hamlet*" was the longest-running Broadway production of the play, with 101 performances, until John Gielgud played the role for 132 performances in 1936. (Source internet IMDB). Barrymore's *Hamlet* with designs by Robert Edmond Jones was staged at the Sam H Harris Theatre in New York between 16 November 1922 and February 1923. The production was a great critical success.

12. Eddie Foy, 1856-1928, American actor, comedian, vaudevillian

13. May Irwin, 1862-1938, actor, singer, vaudevillian

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### **Chris Thomas** ***Glyn and Rowena Griffiths and the Powyses***

In April and May this year Judy Robinson contacted me and said she possessed a small collection of books by JCP, Llewelyn, and T.F.P, some signed, as well as books by other members of the Powys family and their associates. The collection belonged to Judy's late father, Glyn Griffiths, who had met JCP, Llewelyn and Littleton personally. She said that her father had once given hospitality for several days to Littleton Powys when he delivered two lectures in Swansea in May 1945 (both lectures appear in Littleton's memoir *Still the Joy of It* (1956). Littleton refers to Judy's father and these lectures in a letter, dated 19 July 1949, to his friend A. G. Prys-Jones: *Luckily I have a sort of agent in Swansea – Glyn Griffiths Eynon – he who persuaded me 4 years ago to go to Swansea and talk to the Bookman's Society on the Powys family and to the rotary on my pet subject 'The Importance of field Nature History in Education....'* Swansea was the home town of Glyn Griffiths - see *Powys Review*, No.22, 1988). Littleton's lecture *The Powys Family* was subsequently published as a booklet and reissued by the *Western Gazette* in Yeovil in April 1953. In *Still the Joy of It*, pp.134-138, Littleton refers to the hospitality of Glyn and Rowena when he visited Swansea.

Judy also explained her father had corresponded with Littleton, Llewelyn and JCP and had been presented with a sketch of Llewelyn made by Gertrude in 1920 when he, and his wife, Rowena, visited Llewelyn at Chydyok in 1936. They also later visited JCP at Blaenau Ffestiniog with their daughter in 1957. Judy said that her late mother had contributed a brief article to the *Powys Review* about these visits – see My Memories of the Powys Family in *Powys Review* 29/30. This issue also reproduced a letter from Llewelyn to Glyn Griffiths in which Llewelyn refers to Judy's mother 'Mistress Rowena' presenting her with a briar rose he had picked from Tumbledown. This letter is also reproduced in *The Letters of Llewelyn Powys*, 1943, p.296. Judy said in her e-mail to me that although she was only 10 or 11 at the time her parents visited JCP she could still recall JCP's striking presence as well as the small upstairs room where he greeted visitors. JCP refers to the visit of Glyn's family in a letter, dated 24 July 1957, to Louis Wilkinson, *We have just had a visit from Mr Glyn Griffiths and his wife Rowena, a beautiful and distinguished lady, & their daughter Judith of about twelve or thirteen.*

*They had entertained old Littleton in Swansea when he lectured there on us all.* The letter was reproduced in *Newsletter 75*, March 2012, p.35.

Judy told me she was keen to pass on some of the items from her father's collection to appreciative readers and wondered if these items might be of interest to the Society. I replied in the affirmative. Later Judy agreed to donate to the Society's collection original letters to her father from Littleton (12 June 1940, 9 February 1954 and 28 December 1953), and from JCP (16 April 1957). These letters are all reproduced in this issue of the Newsletter. Judy said she would also like to donate Gertrude's sketch of Llewelyn which I explained we would transfer to the Dorset Museum. The sketch has never been published but is not in good condition and not suitable for reproduction in the Newsletter. Judy also gifted to the collection Littleton's signed and dated copy (February 8 1954) of his lecture on the Powys family, a copy of an appreciation and tribute to TFP, and Father Littleton Alfred Powys's poem *Ode to the West Wind*.

Judy kindly donated some of her father's other books to the book sale at this year's conference including a copy of the de luxe edition of *Porius* which was successfully auctioned and acquired by a generous bidder helping to raise funds for the Society. Judy said she wished to retain other items because of family links and memories.

Llewelyn, his personality, his philosophy of life and his writing clearly also made a great impression on Judy's father who composed an obituary for him. This does not seem to have ever been published and we are glad to reproduce Llewelyn's In Memoriam by Glyn here for the first time. It is remarkably perceptive, sensitive and a passionate tribute to a much admired man.

I am very grateful for the assistance of Marcel Bradbury, for liaison with Judy and his help collecting and transporting books.

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### *A letter from JCP to Glyn Griffiths*

1 Waterloo  
Blaenau Ffestiniog  
Merionethshire  
North Wales

Tuesday April 16 1957

My dear Professor Glyn Griffiths

Yes indeed my friend Miss Phyllis Playter and I – she is still as staunch an American citizen as I am a staunch subject of our Queen – but our ideas over politics are identical! – will be both of us, delighted to see you and Rowena – aye how that name brings back Ivanhoe![1]

Think of you such a typical and perfect Welshman, having a daughter of Cedric the Saxon as your lady!

Yes I am sorry to hear of the death of your friend David Harold (there's a great Sais name!) Idris Powell.[2]

I see the distant outline of Cader Idris every morning in my little half an hour's walk before breakfast!

Yes indeed and indeed Miss Playter and I will be delighted to welcome you and Rowena on Wednesday afternoon 24 of July.

Yrs in happy anticipation of that day.

J C Powys

## Notes

1.JCP is of course referring to *Ivanhoe* by Walter Scott, first published in 1819. The novel, set in England, includes historical as well as fictional characters and deals with conflicts between Saxons, Normans, Templars and Jewish characters during the period of the Third Crusade. In the novel *Ivanhoe*, the son of Cedric, a noble Saxon Lord is in love with his father's ward (not his daughter as JCP asserts), the Lady Rowena. In *Autobiography* JCP tells us when he was a child he loved to hear *Ivanhoe* read aloud to him. He also says he read almost all of Scott's works and believed Scott's novels were *the most powerful literary influence of my life*. Thackeray's novel *Rebecca and Rowena* (1850) is a comic sequel to Scott's *Ivanhoe*.

2.David Harold Idris Powell, 1893-1957, served with the Welsh Fusiliers in WW1 when he was severely wounded. He was sub editor of the *Cambria Daily Leader* and editor of the *South Wales Evening Post*. He is buried in Gorseinon Congregational chapelyard in Swansea.

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### *A Letter from Littleton Powys to Rowena Griffiths*

The Quarry House  
Sherborne  
Dorset

June 12<sup>th</sup> 1940

My dear Rowena

I am so thankful to receive your letter of really good news: for it looks as though Glyn will be well again before long: but he will have to be very patient with himself when he starts work again – it wont be easy at first, but he will get into it and be so happy in living a normal life again. Give him my love and accept my love yourself – God be with you all.

Affectionately

Littleton

\*\*\*\*

## *Two Letters from Littleton Powys to Glyn Griffiths*

Stronghold  
West Pennard  
Glastonbury  
Somerset

February 9<sup>th</sup> 1954

My dear Glyn

I don't like you going on your wanderings again, but it was obvious that it was no good your doing that work for the company & having to pay your own expenses. You'll always be wanted, that is one good thing. I am sure you miss your little daughter.

I have autographed *The Powys Family* – I had never heard of Kenneth Young [1] till today when at least 5 letters referred to his talk about an interview he had with Theodore – I hope never to hear of him again & don't fancy I shall –

I shall be sending out a really understanding article about Theodore written by someone who knows what he is talking about – but who that someone is with initials J.C.L I don't know.

All best wishes to you & your dear Rowena

Affectionately

Littleton

### **Notes**

1. The *Radio Times*, issue 1578, 7-13 February 1954, listed a broadcast on the Home Service on Sunday 7 February 1954 of a talk on T. F. Powys by Kenneth Young which noted: *As a young reporter Mr Young once wrote an account of an interview with Mr Powys which led to some misunderstanding. No fewer than 6 churchwardens waited on his editor in protest.*

Stronghold  
West Pennard  
Glastonbury  
Somerset

February 18<sup>th</sup> 1954

My dear Glyn

Here is the finest appreciation of Theodore [1] – 22 years do but will last for ever!

This poem [2] by John's boy and the RC priest – he dictated it to an 'angel in the house' who actually could hear what he said which is more than I could in these latter days.[2]

He was very thrilled that I was having his Ode printed & I tried to hurry the Printers up but of course they didn't realise how near the end he was. Anyway he saw the printers proof & he & Dinah [3] corrected them... It's such a joy to me to read a poem in Miltonic blank verse with sense – its really in the old grand style.

My love to you & Rowena

Yrs ever

Littleton

## Notes

1. *T. F. Powys, An Appreciation* by J. C. L published in the *King's College London Review*, May 1932

2. *Ode to the West Wind* by the Revd. Fr Littleton A. Powys and In His Memory, composed at St. Teresa's Private hospital, Corston, Bath, Jan, 1954, privately printed. Littleton Alfred Powys, 1902-1954. He is buried next to his mother in Perrymead cemetery, Bath – see the article Buried in Bath by Stephen Powys Marks in *Newsletter* 70, July 2010. For two other poems by Littleton Alfred Powys see *Newsletter* 59, November 2006. For accounts of how Dinah White transcribed LAP's poem *Ode to the West Wind* and an appreciation of his suffering and physical condition in hospital see the articles about LAP in *Newsletter* 59, November 2006.

3. Dinah White who was Littleton Alfred's carer, companion and amenuensis at the hospital. JCP's letters to Dinah White (1953-1956) have been acquired by the National Library of Wales.

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## Glyn Griffiths *In Memoriam* Llewelyn Powys

It was indeed poignant to hear of the slipping away of Mr Llewelyn Powys from what was to him, this earthly paradise.

His long fight has at last ended.

A rare spirit and courageous genius has departed from a world which he loved so passionately, and to which he clung with uncanny tenacity and valiant joyfulness. He was a symbol of overflowing life – a flame burning incessantly to the white heat of concentration.

I owe a great debt to my friend, Mr Bryn Davies, B.A. Pontardawe who initiated me into the writings of Mr. Llewelyn Powys. It was following his valuable advice that I commenced reading "Earth Memories" – essays abounding in poetic earthiness and lovely sincerity. The author's style so limpid and effortless; the force of his dynamic personality shining through with its deeply religious basis.

My wife and I shall continue to re-live the spontaneously happy time which we spent with him, his wife, Miss Alyse Gregory, the American authoress, and his sister Miss Gertrude Powys, the artist at their home in Dorset. He had received my short appreciation

of “Earth Memories”, and had written by return with humanity that was both rich and rare. There followed the most generous of invitations to visit him.

Never shall we forget the extreme kindness, radiant charm and graceful sympathy, revealed during our all too short contacts with him. Sad indeed it is to realise that never again in this world, shall we feel aglow with the warmth of his personality – never again shall we hear his cultured voice, modulated through the strain of the terrible disease of tuberculosis which for thirty years had attacked him so fiercely.

There were occasions when he felt that his kind of vision was so remote from his generation of the modern papers that it was not even understood. He referred especially “to cocksure cocktail critics, who seemed incapable of stepping beyond the boundaries of their wasteland of the comic and the cynical.”

Some of the notices I have read since his death – notably in the London press – have most certainly confirmed his view of the paucity of their outlook and narrowness of their vision.

Mr. Llewelyn Powys firmly believed that the secret of Life was Poetry, and that the true purpose of Life was Love, he constantly asserted that “When all the pride, greed, wickedness and madness was over – these whispers of Poetry and Love, would be accepted by the happy children of a happy world.”

There is so much danger in the present day for young people to be intimidated by the mass psychology of the successful commercial world. Creativeness is liable to be crushed beneath a storm of materialistic irrationalism.

Mr. Llewelyn Powys was vitally alive to all this. He reiterated the importance of jealously guarding one’s originality and independence of thought, never becoming a slave to the common superficialities of a too conventional outlook. The great privilege of really being alive and being vividly aware of the divine philosophy is in his estimation to be infinitely more prized than any contemptuous adventures into the realm of social climbing or the making of fatuous efforts to attain the vulgar rewards of satisfied personal vanity. He epitomised this when he penned in one of his letters to me “the real rewards of life have nothing to do with comfort but always with poetic sensibility and this revelation is the reward of a passionate spiritual integrity that comes of being free in mind, and body, generous, understanding and fearless.”

His obvious simplicity and sincerity were characterised when he enclosed for my wife, in one of his delectable letters a briar rose which had been picked in tumbledown, the great field above his Dorset home, and which had arrived only that morning for him in Clavadel, Davos - they plough themselves into one’s heart.

The recent failure through financial reasons of the *Welsh Review* edited so ably by Mr. Gwyn Jones was a grief to him. He was of the opinion that some rich Welshman would surely have been gracious enough to subsidise the effort. “It has proved itself an admirable publication” had been his comment to me. He was also impressed with the excellent review by Mr. D. I. H. Powell, the Editor of the *South Wales Evening Post*, of his latest book *Love and Death*.

Miss Alyse Gregory's masterly introduction to the latter work proved her beyond all doubt a writer of the highest order. Her brilliant courage, dedicated energy and devoted affection, constantly revealed side by side with her husband must now be a source of immense consolation to her.

He has passed on, but his books and letters will be with us always. They will strengthen us tremendously and give us a greater impetus to live a full and richer life. His spirit and intense love of life will never die in our hearts.

"When death comes you want to have lived bravely, proudly and generously – to have understood all you could possibly understand." We salute you quietly Mr. Llewelyn Powys. This earth will be much the poorer without you.

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**Chris Thomas**  
***Llewelyn Powys writes to the Commissioner of Road Traffic  
for the south of England***

Recently Roger Bond spent a holiday in the village of East Chaldon renting a cottage from Rosemary Hodder who has lived in the village all her life. Roger told me that Rosemary is the daughter of Percy Webb who used to run buses and coaches out of Chaldon to Weymouth, Dorchester and surrounding areas in the 1930s.

Roger said that Rosemary has a fund of knowledge about the Powys family and keeps a small collection of documents and letters relating to the Powyses in East Chaldon including a letter dated 15 July 1933 from Llewelyn to the Commissioner of Road Traffic for the south of England appealing to the authorities not to discontinue maintenance of local bus services. Llewelyn's articulate and persuasive letter on behalf of the residents of East and West Chaldon resonates with the contemporary decline of rural bus services.

Llewelyn's letter is reproduced below with the permission of Rosemary Hodder. This was not the first time Llewelyn had communicated urgently with public authorities for in 1929 he wrote to his friend H. Rivers Pollock for advice how best to encourage the Government to prevent the activities of a survey boat from interfering with local Ringstead fishermen and their livelihood - see *The Letters of Llewelyn Powys*, edited by Louis Wilkinson (1943), p.156. We know that JCP was also acquainted with Percy Webb who he mentions in his diary for 14 June, 1934: *Mr Webb came and took me to Wool (The Dorset Year*, edited by Morine Krissdóttir and Roger Peers).

Roger Bond booked a holiday cottage in East Chaldon from Rosemary Hodder on-line through Cottage-Holidays-Dorset.co.uk. You can also google Damers Cottage Chaldon Herring.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chydyok,  
East Chaldon,  
Dorchester,  
Dorset.

July 15<sup>th</sup> 1933

Commissioner of Road Traffic  
for the south of England

Dear Sir:

On behalf of the inhabitants of East Chaldon and West Chaldon I am venturing to appeal to you to do nothing to prevent the continuation of our bus service. Without such a carrier's conveyance our local shopping centres would be inaccessible for poor people.

Although it can be shown that East Chaldon is distant from Winfrith church only one mile it is a further half mile to the Red Lion on the main road where the national bus from Swanage to Weymouth passes. (There is no National bus service from Swanage to Dorchester.) The more direct route to the main road over the downs (known as the Five Marys) is so exposed that it is almost impossible for anybody but men in the full vigour of life to venture upon it in bad weather. From the cottages of West Chaldon to the Red Lion the distance is three miles, the West Chaldon lane over the same ridge of downs being as exposed as the Five Marys lane.

It is hard to explain in writing the topographical circumstances that render a village bus service of such paramount consequence to us. Even a glance at an ordnance map would not show the steepness of the lanes or how slippery they can be for pedestrians, or how difficult it is in winter to walk over the downs in rain and wind and darkness; the National bus returning from Weymouth not reaching the "Oak Tree" where we get out, until 8.P.M.

Many of us have friends and relations in Dorchester and Weymouth and if our bus should be disqualified we shall be cut off from them, nor shall we have any means of conducting business in these centres, or of bringing back to the village the goods we have bought (crates, baskets, parcels etc.) or of selling our vegetables, fruits and eggs and other country produce.

I write with feeling as I live with my wife and sisters in an outlying cottage A mile out of East Chaldon so that should the bus service be suppressed we should be utterly isolated, and as far as transport is concerned would have reverted to medieval conditions. I would beg you therefore before you consent to having us compelled (old men, women and children) to walk to the main road for the National bus, to send some representative here who by personal observation could appreciate the importance of our case.

The bus starting from the Village Green on these three mornings in the week is an event of consequence for all dwellers in these hamlets. I can assure you if these communications (with Weymouth on Thursday and with Dorchester on Wednesday and Saturday) are brought to an end a most damaging blow will have been struck at the vital life of our community, both from a social and economical point of view. I would therefore, with all due respect, make this an especial appeal, for your intervention on our behalf, in granting a licence for our bus service.

Yours obediently  
Llewelyn Powys

## News and Notes

### ***From Goulven le Brech and Marcella Henderson Peal: The Powys Collection at IMEC***

Jacqueline Peltier's collection of material relating to JCP, Llewelyn and TFP can be accessed at IMEC (Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine) at the Abbey of Ardenne in Caen.

See a description of the collection at:

[https://www.imec-archives.com/archives/collection/AS/FR\\_145875401\\_P1081JCP](https://www.imec-archives.com/archives/collection/AS/FR_145875401_P1081JCP)

IMEC is an organisation created in 1988 by researchers and publishing professionals with the aim of gathering archival collections and studies devoted to the main publishing houses, journals, books and writing of the twentieth century. Powys Society member Goulven le Brech is Assistant Director of Collections at IMEC and has been invited to give a joint talk with Marcella Henderson Peal about the IMEC Powys collection at next year's conference.

### ***From Marcella Henderson Peal: Kenneth White (1936-2023)***

In August I was informed of the passing of Kenneth White via a group of Academics specialising in English literature and civilisation. Kenneth White was the author of *The Life Technique of John Cowper Powys* published in 1978. There is a Kenneth White collection at IMEC. Goulven met Kenneth White and tells me that Kenneth's home is going to become a writer's retreat. (Ed: Kenneth White was a Franco-Scots writer, and the author of many collections of poetry, travelogues and essays. He was famous for the development of *geopoetics* (the study of the interrelationship between man and the natural world) which he applied to the work of JCP. He established the International Institute of Geopoetics in 1989 and was a champion of cross-cultural and transdisciplinary studies. He was the recipient of awards and honours, made his home, Gwened, *the house of the tides*, in Trébeurden, Brittany. He taught at the universities of Pau and the Sorbonne.)



*Kenneth White*

### **Little Blue Books**

In September Goulven le Brech published *Little Blue Books, Histoire de l'éditeur le plus rocambolesque du monde*, the first title in the new "Le peuple du livre" collection from éditions l'échappée. Goulven's book is an account of the life, work and publishing enterprise of Emanuel Haldeman-Julius (1889-1951), publisher, journalist, writer, philosopher, activist and friend to all friends of freedom (including JCP). See more information at: <https://www.lechappee.org/collections/le-peuple-du-livre/little-blue-books>.

**From Chris Thomas:**

### **Anselm Kiefer's Finnegans Wake**

In August our President, Timothy Hyman, RA, recommended a visit to White Cube in London's Bermondsey Street, to see the latest collection of huge panoramic paintings, sculptures and installations by the German artist Anselm Kiefer. Kiefer, born 1945, works in multimedia. His themes focus on history, dream, fragments of memory, the horrors of world conflicts, German culture and post war urban devastation. In this new collection Kiefer concentrated on his obsessive engagement with Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce's *Here Comes Everybody*, inscribed on the entrance, greets the visitor. Kiefer's use of materials and objects such as a vast pile of concrete rubble and wire, as well as metal sunflowers and glass vitrines seem to reflect Joyce's experiment with a complex multiplicity of linguistic forms. Motifs are duplicated: old bicycles, wheelchairs, a double helix, snakes. Inevitably I thought of JCP's 1943 essay on *Finnegans Wake* first published in *Modern Reading*, No.7 and reprinted in 1947 in *Obstinate Cymric* in which he confessed how much he admired *Finnegans Wake* referring to its *pluralistic, Pantagrueian "mélange"*. Tim told me he thought Anselm Kiefer's show was astonishing and a true phenomenon: *it felt very relevant to JCP - multiverse and cosmic/panoramic and fragments.*

### **Likes and Dislikes**

In N&N in *Newsletter* 109, July 2023, p.34, we quoted from an anthology (originally published in 1981) of the prejudices of the friends and acquaintances of bookseller George F Sims including the likes and dislikes of JCP. For a longer selection of likes and dislikes collected by George Sims readers may wish to consult *Newsletter* 60, March 2007, pp.32-33.

### **Elizabeth Myers and JCP**

In the *TLS*, 4 January 1957, Wilson Knight reviewed the publication of *Still the Joy of It* by Littleton Powys and referred to JCP in a way that is still very relevant today: *Perhaps the finest insight of all is given by her [Elizabeth Myers] words on John Cowper Powys whom she regards as one not adequately recognised by our time because his "ruthless genius" outrages so many of its tenets.* Wilson Knight quotes a letter, included in *Still the Joy of It*, from Elizabeth Myers to Littleton: *Formidable is John Cowper Powys - He overthrows the claims of the world, the criminal claims of the psychoanalysts, the limited claims of science, the fogged and cruel claims of the intellectual orthodox. But John will come into his own. You and I and John may not live to see this – perhaps it will not be for a hundred years, but the time will come (I see the beginning of it now) when the generality of men will hail him for the life-giving genius that he is.* Wilson Knight concludes the review reflecting on the significance of the words of Elizabeth Myers: *The statement may be bold; but it may in essence be true. And it is because both Littleton and his wife Elizabeth had their own share of the true Powys insight that this volume is itself so valuable.*

## James Hanley, JCP and Compston Mackenzie

Compton Mackenzie, reviewing James Hanley's collection of stories, *Men in Darkness*, in the *Daily Mail*, 6 October 1931, gives a harsh critical appraisal of JCP's preface to Hanley's book: *Perhaps the idiotic preface by Mr. John Cowper Powys has shaken my confidence in him (James Hanley), for I find myself wondering if a man capable of inspiring an introducer to write four pages of such nonsense can really be a great writer.* [Here Mackenzie quotes JCP's preface] *A certain bald, bleak, stripped, winnowed and harrowed style, bare of every kind of literary "purple patch" is the most effective. Such raked-out, combed out, and scraped out "beauty" is exactly the sort of thing that our Philistines in these matters are now hostile to. If this egregious sentence be a specimen of the new style, the new style is self condemned.* Compton Mackenzie comments: *I should be glad to hear from Mr Powys, who is apparently a lecturer in America, how he proposes to harrow a winnowed style, and why he should want to use eight epithets to say what an old fashioned writer could express with one. To put peroxide on grey hairs will not loosen the arteries and Mr Powys when he capers about as a godfather is apt to make not only himself but also his godson look ridiculous. However do not let this tiresome preface prevent your reading Men in Darkness....*

## The Great Powys

New member, Angharad Llewelyn Bradford informs us she has located in the BFI National Archive a copy of Herbert Williams's drama/documentary film about JCP called *The Great Powys*. The film was made in 1994 for HTV in Wales, and features Freddie Jones as JCP and Suzanne Bertish as Phyllis. See the BFI catalogue entry at [www.bfi.org.uk](http://www.bfi.org.uk) and go to Search the BFI archive. The film was reviewed by Chris Wilkinson in *Newsletter* 24, April 1995 and shown at our annual conference in 1995. Herbert Williams also wrote an article about the making of the film, entitled JCP on TV, which was published in *Powys Review*, 29/30 in 1995. Angharad notes that NLW also has a copy of the film in their Powys archives. We plan to show the film again at a future conference.

## From Byron Ashton:

### A photo of JCP

I recently acquired a framed photograph of JCP.

The reverse of the frame is inscribed: *John Cowper Powys in his study at 1 Waterloo Blaenau Ffestiniog about 1958. To Roland from Raymond 19/viii/1979.* I'm guessing that Roland is Roland Matthias and Raymond, I'm sure is Raymond Garlick.

(Ed: See tributes to Raymond Galick (1926-2011) in *Powys Review* 31/32, 1997 and Roland Mathias (1915-2007) in *Newsletter* 62, November 2007. Byron's photo of JCP



*John Cowper Powys*

was originally reproduced in *Powys Review* No.1, Spring 1977. Raymond Garlick and Roland Mathias contributed to the Welsh literary periodical *Dock Leaves/The Anglo Welsh Review* and both were keen champions of JCP. *The Hollowed Out Elder Stalk* by Roland Mathias is a study of JCP's poetry.)

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## **Rachel Hassall**

### ***Some Powys family wills***

A will is just a legal document, but also an intensely personal statement. When writing a will the testator not only expresses their wishes as to how their property or estate are to be distributed after their death, but also identifies those individuals or organisations important to them in life.

Using the probate search section of the GOV.UK website <https://www.gov.uk/search-will-probate> you can order for just £1.50 a downloadable pdf copy of the probate documents of anyone who has died in England and Wales after 1857. For those interested in the Powys family, their wills provide an additional insight into the individuals and objects that most important to them. Having ordered copies of the wills of the Rev. C.F. Powys, Mary Cowper Powys and their children, I thought a brief overview of their contents might prove interesting to readers of the Newsletter.

### **Wealth at death/value of estate**

Accompanying the will is usually a document detailing the testator's date and place of death, the names of those granted administration of the estate, and the net value of the estate. Of all the Powys family wills I ordered, the net value of the Rev. Charles Francis Powys' estate was the largest, valued in 1923 at £29,432 (the equivalent of approx. £855,235 today), and of the children the net value of Philippa Powys's estate was the largest, valued in 1963 at £6,366 (the equivalent of approx. £133,445 today).

### **Death and burial requests**

Not all the Powys family wills include specific requests relating to their own death or burial, but of those I looked at the most detailed requests were made by Llewelyn, Alyse Gregory, Philippa and Littleton Charles Powys.

In his will made at Chydyok on 31 October 1933, Llewelyn asked that on his death his executors (Hamilton Rivers Pollock and Gerald Brennan) were to 'see that a doctor cuts an artery or in some other way makes it absolutely impossible for me to be in a trance or alive.' Alyse Gregory included identical wording in her will made in 1966, with the additional request that she should be cremated and her ashes left unclaimed. Llewelyn provided detailed instructions as to where he should be buried: if he died 'in a great city abroad' he was to be cremated and his ashes brought back to Chydyok garden; if he died 'in a wild place abroad' he should be buried where he died; and if he died in England he asked to be buried in his garden or on the open downs at Chydyok, adding 'let me have no coffin and let my body lie on its side with arms and legs flexed and not crossed.' In her will made in 1956, Philippa requested that if she died within a 50 mile radius of East Chaldon she should be buried in East Chaldon churchyard as near as possible to the

grave of ‘Alice Hewlet’ [Alice Jane Hewlett was buried at East Chaldon on 15 December 1944, aged 45], adding that Walter Miller of Lilac Cottage, East Chaldon was to act as undertaker and to ‘provide a coffin of the cheapest type with no brass but that my Brother Llewelyn’s sign of the Ankh marked in black on it’. Philippa also stated that at her funeral there was to be ‘no sermon, no music and no expensive wreaths and if possible the bearers of my coffin to be men I have known.’ Littleton, who made his will in 1951, asked to be buried in Sherborne town cemetery with his ‘beloved first wife Alice Mabel Powys’, despite his second wife Elizabeth Myers being buried in the Roman Catholic section of same cemetery.

Although he made no specific request concerning his burial, John Cowper Powys’ son the Revd. Littleton Alfred Powys requested in his will that after his funeral a luncheon with wine, at a cost of £1 per head, should be provided for the priests who attended it.

### **Witnesses**

The witnesses of the various Powys wills include neighbours, solicitors and bank clerks. When Mary Cowper Powys made her will at Montacute in 1909 it was witnessed by her cook Ellen Childs and parlour maid Mary Hockey. John Cowper Powys’ will made in 1937 at Corwen was witnessed by Phyllis Playter’s aunt Harriet Van Dyke and Professor Albert E. Johnson. Theodore and Llewelyn’s wills were both witnessed by Valentine Ackland and Sylvia Townsend Warner, to whom Philippa Powys and Alyse Gregory also left bequests.

### **Literary copyright/royalties**

Some of the Powys wills also include instructions concerning their papers and literary copyright. John Cowper Powys bequeathed to Phyllis Playter all of his ‘personal manuscripts, memoranda, diaries, writings and other literary copyright and the benefit of all agreements subsisting in relation thereto at the time of my death and all royalties or other moneys due or to become due to me thereunder at the date of my death’, and by a later codicil appointed his nephew Francis Llewelyn Powys his Literary Executor. Littleton’s second wife the author Elizabeth Myers died intestate, but in a second codicil made in 1952 to his own will, Littleton bequeathed to Elizabeth’s mother all the royalties from his book *The Letters of Elizabeth Myers*, which had been published the previous year. Theodore bequeathed his copyright and royalties upon trust to his wife Violet during her lifetime, and Philippa left all her papers and manuscripts to Alyse Gregory or, if she predeceased her, to Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland with permission to publish any of them ‘at her or their discretion’ and to retain any royalties.

### **Bequests**

Powys family heirlooms are identified in some of the wills. When the Rev. Charles Francis Powys made his will at Montacute in 1890 he bequeathed to his wife Mary Cowper Powys ‘all my jewellery, plate, plated articles, furniture, linen, glass, china, pictures and other articles of household use or ornaments, horses, carriages, saddlery and stable furniture, live and dead stock, implements and utensils, wines, liquors, household stores and provisions.’ Some of these family heirlooms crop up later in their children’s

wills, with Llewelyn bequeathing his father's gold watch to John Cowper Powys's son Littleton, and his jewel case to his 'darling sister Katie.' Llewelyn also bequeathed his bust of Epicurus to Clifford Musgrave of Yeovil, his wallet and its contents and Edward Fitzgerald's shawl to Gamel Woolsey, and his collection of washed flints to Dorchester Museum.

The Powys family silver features in a number of the wills, with Littleton's wife Mabel bequeathing to John Cowper Powys the Powys silver salver, the Powys cake basket, the dinner service with the Powys crest and any other silver marked with the Powys crest. Albert Reginald Powys bequeathed to his son Oliver all his silver and silver-plated articles bearing the Powys crest, and Philippa bequeathed to her sister Lucy Penny all her silver and silver plate.

John Cowper Powys addressed his marital situation in his will, bequeathing to his wife Margaret 'the property, money, securities, furniture and other effects mentioned in the Statutory Declaration made 9 July 1934', and in a codicil added to his will in 1955 he bequeathed to 'my friend Phyllis Playter' his share of no.1 Waterloo Cottage in Blaenau Ffestiniog. Littleton and Mabel Powys also remembered John's 'faithful friend and companion' Phyllis Playter in their wills, as did Alyse Gregory.

It would be interesting to know whether the special bequest made by the Revd. C.F. Powys's soldier brother Captain Littleton Albert Powys, who died of cholera at Kandahar in 1879, of £500 for the benefit of the non-commissioned officers and men of the 59<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot [now the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment] is still active. Devotees of Llewelyn, however, continue to benefit from his birthday legacy of £100 to be invested in trust and the yearly interest paid to the nearest public house to Chydyok so that on 13<sup>th</sup> August each year 'the interest be spent in free drinks for anybody who enters the tavern after seven o'clock in the evening'!

(**Chris Thomas** notes that in late August 1933 Llewelyn wrote to JCP and briefly described his preferred arrangements for his burial – see *The Letters of Llewelyn Powys*, selected by Louis Wilkinson, 1943, p.176. Llewelyn also drafted his Instructions for the dispatch of my body in case of my death, dated December 15, 1935 – see *The Letters of Llewelyn Powys*, p.176-177.)

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### **Chris Thomas** *JCP and Lilian Greener*

In January this year I was contacted by a non-member, Barry Greener, a retired local authority officer, in Coventry. He wrote to me to tell me that whilst clearing his late mother's papers he found a letter addressed to her from JCP. Barry asked if the letter might be of interest. I directed him to the National Library of Wales who has now acquired the letter for their Powys collection.

Barry told me that his mother, born in 1910, was a member of the Coventry Writers Circle in the 1950s and worked as a journalist for local newspapers such as the *Coventry*

*Telegraph*, the *Coventry Standard*, the diocesan *Shire and Spire* as well as several other publications. Barry's mother wrote articles for periodicals under the name Lilian Greener as well as L Mary Greener and Jill Morton. She seems to have developed a very keen interest in the work of JCP and began to correspond with him. This resulted in JCP's invitation to Barry's mother to visit Blaenau Ffestiniog which she did with her family in 1958. Later Lilian published an account of her visit to JCP which is reproduced in this issue of the Newsletter. Unfortunately, however Barry could not find any record of the source of the published item although the date of the article, November 10<sup>th</sup> 1961, is written on the cutting.

I have slightly amended and edited Lilian's article removing factual biographical details relating to JCP which will already be familiar to members.

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### **L. Mary Greener** *A Portrait of a Genius*

One of the greatest writers of the last fifty years, John Cowper Powys, is widely recognised as a genius, standing, it is said "above the contemporary literary scene like some primaeval monolith." Consequently, there is a tide of new interest in his work.

As a book seems a more familiar and personal thing when we have read something of its author, a portrait of John Cowper Powys would seem fitting just now, for those about to read him.

I first met John Cowper Powys in 1958, in his stone typically Welsh house which nestles with a cluster of similar cottages near tumbling water, above beautiful valleys, in Merionethshire.

From the exterior of this plain, sturdy home there was no indication of the great personality within, unless it was that its very unostentatiousness was a pointer to his innate humility. My first greeting from Mr Powys was typical of him; warm and compelling. Aged eighty-five, he was reclining on his couch before the window upstairs.

But even while I was in the narrow hallway below, I could hear his clear voice calling "Come straight up my dear, Come Along. And do forgive me for not coming down to you."

His non-stop welcome continued as I climbed the stairs. Then as I entered his small room, his arms were flung out to greet me. When I held out my hands (for there was evidently no thought of a single handshake in his greeting) he excitedly laughed "Well – how wonderful – you've got my turned back thumbs. Let me look."

Happily he pumped my hands, then studied them again, saying "I can see you're one of my own kind. You can't bear humbug or pretentiousness. Now sit down here where I can see you better."

His long silver white hair swung as he motioned me to a seat facing him. Would I like the armchair or the rocker? As I already sensed that the nature of our time together would be more mercurial than static, I did not accept the rocking chair!

From his couch he chattered to me of a hundred things. And for all his greatness, he had such artful youthfulness and sincerity, that despite the forty years difference in our ages, I felt that we had known each other since the beginning of time.

Our words poured forth. We both laughed joyously. We felt so exquisitely energised that I wondered we did not throw off sparks. We found that every whim of his was mine. All my idiosyncrasies had been with him always. How we both detested artifice and revelled in the natural things!

It seemed on that afternoon, that we differed in only one taste. John Cowper Powys feels the cold. Even on that warm August day, he had a fire, and blankets were across his legs.

He opened the manuscript he had been writing and let me see his work. We laughed together at his immense writing careering crookedly across the plain pages. I saw his manuscript, in longhand of a book recently completed.

In his book *Visions and Revisions* he writes: “What Visions and Revisions really amounts to is a booklover’s private and special shelf of his favourite books. As I write these words, I survey in front of me an actual shelf containing these very books...on the shelf opposite my couch... Within reach of my left arm is the Bible in Welsh, along with our own authorised version.”

He showed me this shelf of favourite books, and his Bibles on the window ledge (which was over a foot wide, being the thickness of the Welsh stone walls).

To have the true perspective on the greatness of John Cowper Powys, one must compare his with other men. Compared to many, alas, he is like a lion among the mice.

The vital force of his whole identity comes from the fount of his spiritual resilience. Not from his physical strength, (for he has often been very very ill. Even as a young man he suffered agonisingly.

One feels that he has “seen life whole” and rejected the dregs; that man’s relation to the elements is of far greater importance to him than man’s contact with material matter. The magnitude and magic of our universe makes the mere piling up physical trifles: the living-up-to-the-Joneses; and the rat race, not only gross, but futile and false to all that is best in us.

John Cowper Powys has said: “The only evolution on earth worth considering is the evolution of the human soul, that is to say of goodness and mercy.” And it was goodness and mercy I could perceive the last time I saw him, as he smilingly waved farewell to my family and me until we were out of sight.



*John Cowper Powys in the mid to late 1950s.  
Photo Henry Lock*

## Chris Thomas

### *Contemporary reviews of review of Wolf's Bane, Wolf Solent and A Glastonbury Romance*

#### **Aconite, a review by A E Waite, of *Wolf's Bane* – Rhymes**



A. E. Waite

A.E. Waite (1857-1942) was a poet and important scholarly historian of the western esoteric tradition, occultism, and ceremonial magic. He was an early member of the Order of the Golden Dawn and designed a new modern Tarot pack. He was a regular contributor to Ralph Shirley's *The Occult Review* beginning with the first issue in 1905 and provided frequent reviews and articles on a variety of subjects such as the Holy Grail, Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Alchemy, the Kabbalah, Christian mysticism, Buddhism, Sufism, Spiritualism and Gnosticism as well as articles about Giordano Bruno, John Dee, Jacob Boehme and Robert Fludd. Some of his books on a wide range of subjects were published by Ralph Shirley's firm of William Ryder and Son.

A. E. Waite's review of JCP's first modern collection of poems, *Wolf's Bane* (1916) was published in *The Occult Review*, March 1917. JCP must have known of the review through his cousin, Ralph Shirley, who edited the periodical. JCP also contributed poems to *The Occult Review*. In his review Waite references the literary associations as well as the therapeutic and poisonous properties of the plant wolf's bane also known as aconite, monkshood and devil's helmet. JCP prefaces the collection with a quotation on the title page from *Ode on Melancholy* by John Keats: *No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist Wolfsbane, tight-rooted for its poisonous wine*. A. E. Waite ends his review with a positive comment: *here is memorable poet's work, it's own and no other's which is a high thing to say in these days of many reflections*.

*Wolf's Bane* was first published in the USA by G Arnold Shaw in 1916 and dedicated to JCP's friend, the writer and literary editor Llewellyn Jones, editor of the *Chicago Evening Post*.

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#### **A review of *Wolf Solent* by Edward Garnett**

Edward Garnett (1868-1937) was a playwright, novelist, literary critic, editor and official publisher's reader for Fisher Unwin, Duckworth, and Jonathan Cape. He was responsible for recommending to Cape they publish *Wolf Solent*. He also recommended publication of *The Blackthorn Winter* by Philippa Powys. Edward was the son of Richard Garnett, librarian at the British Museum Reading Room, the husband of Constance Garnett, so admired by JCP for her translations of Dostoevsky and the father of David Garnett, who gave assistance to TFP and helped him find a publisher for his writing. JCP called Edward

Garnett *the most authoritative of all English critics* and in *Autobiography* referred to the Garnett family as *those fearless explorers of the Terra Incognita of Genius*.

Edward Garnett's review of *Wolf Solent* was published in a house magazine produced by Jonathan Cape called *Now & Then. A periodical of Books and Personalities*, No.32, Summer 1929. *Now & Then* had already published reviews of *The Verdict of Bridlegoose* and *Skin for Skin* by Llewelyn Powys in their Spring 1927 issue. Garnett wrote glowing recommendations of *Wolf Solent* internally for Cape and also corresponded privately with JCP about his novel. Some of Garnett's remarks in his private correspondence with JCP and his official reader's report found their way into his published review. Cape continued to publicise JCP's novel in the Autumn 1929 issue of *Now & Then* with a selection of press cuttings celebrating *Wolf Solent*. In February and March 1929 JCP wrote to his brothers Llewelyn and Littleton and told them how Edward Garnett had written a letter to him suggesting various 'artistic' changes to the novel, and how he had given the book *massive and solid praise* (letter to Llewelyn, 15 February 1929). This he said had cheered him greatly. He seems to have especially appreciated Garnett's capacity to understand his work. George Jefferson in his biography of Garnett (1982) quotes from JCP's reply to Garnett: *I don't think I need tell you how grateful I was to receive your most kind and penetrating criticism of Wolf Solent. Your words of praise did my heart good; and now – ever since your letter reached me – I have been working hard at the proofs, cutting and condensing here and there in accordance with your acute suggestions*. Garnett indeed thought very highly of *Wolf Solent* and sent a letter to JCP in May 1929 expressing his admiration (quoted by George Jefferson): *It is a feat, you know that you have accomplished, an astonishingly fine feat, and how deeply saturated your being must be in Dorsetshire essences, spiritual and physical that you could conjure up such a mirage as Wolf Solent from memory. I can't imagine how you could have preserved this birthright so pure in this alien atmosphere of New York city*. JCP replied to Garnett on 22 May 1929: *I am weak in the architectonics of a novel just because novel writing to me is a kind of half serious half mystical indulgence like the stories you tell yourself towards the end of s lonely walk when your body and brain are tired and your imagination has been liberated from all the little teasing things and starts vaguely rambling through the orchards and terraces of dreamy castles in the air!* It is a measure of the importance JCP attached to Garnett's response to *Wolf Solent* that he retained Garnett's manuscript report on the novel until the book collector George Sims acquired the document from him in the 1950s and subsequently offered it for sale in his catalogue No.25 in which he also quoted Garnett's original words about *Wolf Solent*: *...You really hypnotise us so wonderfully...* See *A Life in Catalogues* by George F Sims, 1994, p.22 and *Descents of Memory* by Morine Krissdóttir, Note 107, page 449.

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### **A review of *A Glastonbury Romance* by Edwin Muir and a response by Geoffrey West**

Edwin Muir's review of *A Glastonbury Romance* (not listed in Langridge) was published in *The Listener* on 12 July 1933. The issue of *The Listener* for 26 July 1933 published an exchange of letters (also not listed in Langridge) between Geoffrey West and Edwin Muir

about *A Glastonbury Romance* although JCP doesn't say if he read this exchange as well. Edwin Muir (1887-1959) was a poet, novelist, literary critic, and co-translator, with his wife, of books by Kafka, Herman Broch and Heinrich Mann. In the 1920s Muir regularly contributed to American periodicals and newspapers especially *The Freeman*. Geoffrey West, pseudonym of Geoffrey H Wells (1900-1944?), was a literary critic, bibliographer, book reviewer, novelist and biographer. Geoffrey West reviewed *AGR* in the *Fortnightly Review* August, 1933. He also reviewed works of the Powyses in the *TLS* in the 1930s. West's review of *The Meaning of Culture* was reprinted in NL 96, March 2019.

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### ***A review of A Glastonbury Romance by Compton Mackenzie***

Compton Mackenzie (1883-1972) was a popular and prolific author, biographer, novelist (*Sinister Street*, 1914, *Monarch of the Glen*, 1941, *Whisky Galore*, 1947), poet, essayist, journalist, travel writer, actor, broadcaster, regular book reviewer and literary editor of the *Daily Mail*, polymath, Scottish nationalist, and founder in 1923 of *Gramophone* magazine.

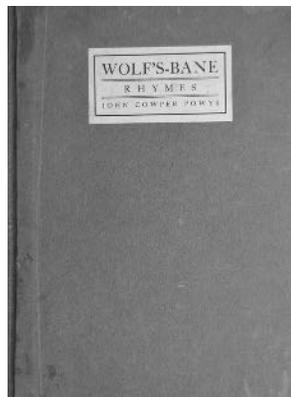
D. H. Lawrence's story *The Man Who Loved Islands* was inspired by Compton Mackenzie who he met on the island of Capri in the 1920s. Mackenzie was a famous author in his time though he is little read these days. Mackenzie's review of *A Glastonbury Romance* (*Daily Mail* 20 July 1933) is an uncompromising negative response to JCP's book.

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### **A. E. Waite *ACONITE***

#### ***A review of Wolf's-Bane: Rhymes, by John Cowper Powys***

The maceration of wolf's-bane produces a poisonous wine according to poetical testimony, yet it is not unknown in medicine and – as aconite – is a plant of renown, though it seems to have been neglected by Paracelsus – that master herbalist – unless indeed he concealed some of its remoter efficacies from the *profanum vulgus* of the contemporary doctorate under an outlandish name. I should be disposed to conclude that a book of rhymes ought not to be labelled Wolf's Bane unless a medicine is contained therein, even if it calls for some pounding before the virtue is extracted. On the faith of this postulate I began my reading of a collection so entitled by Mr. J. C. Powys, whose repute as an essayist has reached me across the Atlantic. I began frankly as one who looks for essences and has heard of a quintessence which is *summum bonum*. It was easy to set aside the Author's Apologia which speaks of his



*Cover of the first edition of  
Wolf's Bane*

“bitter stammered rhymes,” for I should have counted it of little consequence whether he silvered every bolus produced in his metrical apothecary or let all acridities remain on the surface, so only that I found medicine within. In another form of symbolism I prefer a book to be bitter in the mouth and sweet in the belly rather than like that which was swallowed by St. John. Let it be understood, in the next place, that Mr. Powys is a poet and not a simple rhymers, whether he is correct or otherwise in stating that he is too often “tuneless”; and as a poet therefore I questioned him concerning eternal life, which is the chief concern of song. I found my answer as follows: -

The eternal law, the deep life-stream  
Why should I worship thee?  
Better the briefest human dream  
Among the fading trees!

And as evidence of sincerity Mr. Powys rings the changes hereon through seven verses. So much for my canon of criticism, though I shall cleave to it – and perhaps hold it proven by such a salient exception. But it is up against me further that Mr Powys speaks of the fool

Who holds that life is a school  
For training noble souls.

I have read him, line upon line through all his pages, looking for counterblasts to this kind of philosophy, and I have found things here and there which hint at another aspect. He knows that

Life and Reality  
Are high evasive things.

While the rest is nonentity, however it drapes itself. He believes too, that he has heard  
A strange weird voice from the deep  
That opens below all depth.

What is it hinders, therefore so that Mr. Powys, with his real gifts of seeing and thinking, cannot work out into sunlight? One of his cries tells us: -

Let there be for us no after-world.  
Lord of eternal rest.

It is more, however, than a cry, for it comes again as a profession of faith: -

When we lie dead  
With the earth on our head  
All hell may howl behind us,  
It can never find us –

Nor either – presumably – the song of blessed spirits in the inmost circles of heaven. Here is wolf’s-bane assuredly, and little medicine therein. The singer feels it in his bitterness. He feels, I think, also that it is somehow an ill mood in the heart, having no more truth in it than he allows to those priests whom he bids, “Go aside and be dumb, “ because of their false oracles.

Over the hill –  
 Can you hear the sea? –  
 A voice I know  
 Is calling to me.

Of course it is calling, and it is not – as he pretends to himself – the voice of a dead woman “calling out of the ground,” but of

Something beyond and over  
 Without which...  
 Still we go naked

Yet it is something about him – somewhere, everywhere, and between the lines of these lyrics, telling him that in place of the “poisonous wine” there is another cup and a medicine.

Moreover, however much it is apart from what I have called as a mystic the chief concern of song, here is memorable poet’s work, it’s own and no other’s which is a high thing to say in these days of many reflections.

**Edward Garnett**  
*A Review of Wolf Solent*  
*Now & Then, No.32 Summer 1929*

A quarterly reviewer in the course of many jaundiced observations lately remarked ‘We have first to consider whether fiction is worth saving, and secondly, to examine the way in which it might be saved.’ The buzzing of critical flies over the sad stature of the novel is never-ending and the foolishness of such declarations as ‘the next decade should show if fiction is to survive’ is typical of critical myopia. There is, first, nothing to take the place of fiction, and, secondly, people are getting so spoiled by the multiplicity of good fiction offered them that we see the contemptuous reviewer snarling weekly over his bundle of novels, like an ill-tempered dog. I am grateful for clever novels, and doubly grateful for so creative, compelling and fecund a piece of work as *Wolf Solent*. It is a most singular book, not far from ‘a great novel’ in the sense of the breadth of its human canvas and atmospheric richness and by its extremely poetical sense of Nature, which wells up like a spring in nearly every chapter. The hero, Wolf Solent, with his introspections and obsessions one may or may not sympathise with, but, thank heaven! he takes us beyond the boundaries of the well-regulated world and the respectabilities. The book is steeped in the human emanations of generations of Dorset country folk, it is saturated with their loves and lusts intertwined in life and death, for good or evil, and this is its strength. If Wolf’s prepossession with his own mythology and with death and decay, if Squire Urquhart’s obsessions with



*Contents page Now & Then,  
 No.32, Summer 1929*

evil, and old Malakite, the bookseller's sinful passion makes a strange ferment, it is relieved by the everyday naturalness of the people's contacts and by the freshness of the characterisation. How admirable the figure of Mrs. Solent balances that of her old enemy, Miss Selena Gault, an equally resolute woman. How delightfully individual is the Torp family, the rubicund stone-cutter and the mischievous boy Lob and his lovely sister Gerda. Gerda with her 'innocent wantonness' – what a piece of disturbing feminine loveliness she is! how disturbing and strangely real are the scenes when she whistles the blackbird's song on the ramparts of Poll's Camp. And how the spell of passion cast over Wolf waxes stronger still in the scene in 'Yellow Bracken' where the man and the girl and the boy each gets his desire. And what a natural ending are the last pages of that idyll of possession. The natural subtlety, the bold depth of the author's artistic method could not be better exemplified than in that charming chapter. And after Gerda, comes Christie! after the rapture of the flesh comes the rapture of the spirit! The character-drawing of Christie is no less triumphant, and she ensnares Wolf's imagination no less than Gerda ensnared his senses. One may complain, of course, that the author takes over long a time in working out his strange situations and that just as one is dragged by Dostoevsky, willy-nilly, through a great tract of evil brambles and briars before one can tear oneself free from his compelling grip, so it is with Wolf Solent. The novel begins with a love idyl and ends as an epic of circumstances. But, as I have said above, thank heaven! we are not here in the well regulated world, with all the creases of sin and death, decay, and desire smoothed out by the heavy, orthodox iron of Respectability. The admirably drawn figure of Wolf's benefactor, Lord Carfax, winds up the story. What a moral! and what an ending! Nature, indeed, has her own morality better than ours.

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### Edwin Muir

#### *A Review of A Glastonbury Romance*

First published in *The Listener*, 12 July 1933



*Edwin Muir*

This book is between 400,000 and 500,000 words in length, that is, the size of five average novels; it describes the life of a whole town and takes us into the most intimate secrets of about forty characters; it evokes the environment within which these characters live – hills, valleys, moors, streams, churches, houses, hovels, shops, streets, lanes and finally it tries to relate all these people and things, animate and inanimate (if Mr Powys will allow the latter term to apply to anything at all) to a First Cause beyond the silences of the uttermost stellar systems. An attempt so comprehensive and so tremendous deserves more than the normal attention

that a novel receives, and so on the dust cover there are tributes from six writers, one of whom places the book on a level with the greatest works of fiction ever written. Mr Hamish Miles finds it 'enormous, in the very strictest sense of the word', Miss Eleanor

Farjeon regards it as the greatest work of 'the greatest living writer of fiction', 'With the single exception of Thomas Hardy', says Mr Hugh Walpole, 'no English novelist of the last thirty years has evoked the very stuff of the English ground with the power and the poetry which Mr Powys has at command'. 'In breadth, rhythm, and intensity', says Mr Gerald Barry, '*A Glastonbury Romance* has something of the mighty pantheism of Rubens'. Mr C S Forester regards the book as 'one of the most significant and notable of this century'; while Mr J D Beresford makes the extraordinary act of faith: 'I believe that *A Glastonbury Romance* is one of the greatest novels in the world, to be classed with Tolstoy's *War and Peace*'.

Such superlative praise, coming from critics of such experience, makes one chary of saying anything in depreciation of the book. Besides, it is certainly impressive as well as enormous – an excellently chosen epithet; and it is the work of a man of unusual originality of imagination. The best proof of this is that he has created in the book, a whole world, complete in itself. He does not merely describe a milieu, as so many contemporary writers, even the better ones, have sunk to doing; he evokes. It is solely about what he evokes that one may have some doubts; the evocatory power is there in abundance. In a note at the beginning he himself says: 'Not a single scene, or situation, or character, or episode in this book has been drawn in any respect, or in any sense whatever from real life. All is pure invention; and the author is absolutely unacquainted with any living individual or with any existing industry in the Glastonbury of our time'.

That is a challenge, but it is also the first criticism that is likely to occur to anyone. The characters are obviously drawn too largely from Mr Powys' imagination and too little from nature; the world they make up is clearly a world hatched in his mind and then projected and given a local habitation in Glastonbury. But the highest flights of the imagination seem to rise from a union of these two processes, of intuition and observation and when the first quite dispenses with the second it is likely to go astray now and then and produces creatures that, though perhaps impressive in their way, are sometimes monstrous, or even absurd. Mr Powys by his own admission has taken this risk on a grand scale, and the result is a disconcerting mixture of profound truth and sheer psychological melodrama in which it is hard to discover where reality ends and make-believe begins. The London of Dickens was an imaginary structure supported by a diabolical sharp power of observation. Mr Powys' Glastonbury is also an imaginary structure; but one can never be quite certain whether it is real or merely some town in some English Ruritania; or rather one is certain one moment and uncertain the next. There is this constant ebb and flow in the story; one feels in touch with reality at a deep level, and on the next page one may be reading what seems like wild fantasy or even bombast. And Mr Powys infuses as much energy into the one as into the other.

The characters are equally mixed. A few are splendid. Geard of Glastonbury, ex-servant, ex-preacher, sensual mystic and mayor of the town, is, making all allowances for the extravagant powers that Mr Powys claims for him (they include restoring the dead to life), a justly apprehended and superbly portrayed figure. He gives the feeling, so

rare in fiction, that we know everything about him, not merely his outward appearance and his thoughts, but his most secret impulses, his very nature. Matt Dekker, the vicar of Glastonbury, and his son Sam are also excellently drawn, and the Welsh Mr Evans, though tinged deep with melodrama, is a powerful portrait of a tortured sadist. But when Mr Powys comes to his madmen and mad women the whole action seems to flare up into a fantastic nightmare. And the action itself, if unusual, would be imaginatively convincing if it were not for those periodical atmospheric commotions. It turns on the struggle between Geard the mystic and Philip Crow the materialist for the soul of Glastonbury. Crow wants to industrialise it and 'bring it into line with modern development', Geard to awaken the old religious potencies that once made it a place of pilgrimage. Geard joins forces with a group of improbable communists (who would have been better if taken from real life); communal workshops are set up, miracles happen, and Philip Crow is brought to the verge of ruin. Finally a flood sweeps over the town and Geard voluntarily takes leave of life after having rescued his rival. The plot is one that requires a considerable suspension of one's incredulity, but it is excellently handled. It certainly would never have occurred, however, to the author of *War and Peace*.

Where Mr Powys does resemble Tolstoy is in the direct and motionless attention that he gives to each of his characters in turn. They all have their private lives which on examination prove to be interesting, and the resulting sense of busy human diversity is what gives the book its peculiar rich fullness. Mr Powys' imagination is extraordinarily open and receptive to all forms of human experience; indeed receptive is far too colourless a term for the ecstatic zest with which he embraces all the manifestations of life that the nerves can feel or the imagination conceive. This zest is the secret of his power, but it is also the source of his weaknesses; for he ends by trying to embrace things, such as the First Cause, that are too unwieldy for him, and consequently by reducing them, necessarily but arbitrarily, to more manageable dimensions. So while we read him on the First Cause that exists beyond the uttermost stellar systems we cannot help feeling that he is speaking of a very watered down and almost private entity. Besides, he speaks of it both dogmatically and vaguely, as when he says in his first sentence 'At the striking of noon on a certain 5<sup>th</sup> of March there occurred within a causal radius of Brandon railway station and yet beyond the deepest pools of emptiness between the uttermost stellar systems one of those infinitesimal ripples in the creative silence of the First Cause which always occur when an exceptional stir of heightened consciousness agitates any living organism in this astronomical universe'. That tells us very little in a great many words and does nothing to create that 'nobly timeless' quality which Mr Miles rightly finds in the book. That quality flows from a very different and more valid cause; from Mr Powys' vision of human life; and the timelessness would have been enhanced, not destroyed, had the rhapsodies on the cosmos, the sun influences and the earth vibrations been left out. They overlay without explaining those things. They vulgarise, in the vain hope of achieving an impossible completeness, a sincerely religious vision of the world with an imaginative completeness of its own.

It is in his style that Mr Powys' uncertainty of inspiration comes out most clearly. It is consistently verbose, occasionally archaic in a picturesque way, and sometimes inflated in a journalistic way, as in the sentence already quoted; and it reads at its worst like a cross between Jeremy Taylor and Mr James Douglas. The book is full not merely of bad writing but, what is far worse, of bad fine writing. It can be meaninglessly metaphorical: 'A new girl was a new world to ~Mr Barker and his sluggish East Anglian senses stirred in their fen peat depths like great crocodiles heaving up out of sun-baked mud, to meet this new world'. Or turgid: 'But the maniacal and obsessional element in his design soon began to run away with the practical element'. Or merely absurd: 'this tendency of Lady Rachel's to nestle up very close to anyone she trusted, to touch them with her warm body, to yield herself to them, was it a sign that the child in her was not yet absorbed or subsumed in the young woman?' No natural thought could be expressed in this style, which tends to reappear whenever Mr Powys remembers the First Cause, directly or indirectly. On the other hand when he comes to real things such as Sam Dekker's religious struggles or John Geard's mystical trances he sloughs it off and writes simply and immediately. But it lies sometimes like a smothering weight on the story.

These faults are very serious ones: the proof of the book's vitality is that it easily survives them. It creates its own world; it has the self-subsistent quality of a work of imagination. The imagination is mixed; sometimes quite pure, sometimes gratingly false, sometimes pretentious. Mr Powys makes us feel at times that he is a man of genuine original power playing at being a genius. But much must be forgiven a man of original power, and anyone who is interested in more than the passing mode should not miss this book.

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### Geoffrey West

#### *A response to Edwin Muir's review of AGR*

A letter first published in *The Listener*, 26 July 1933

I respect Mr Edwin Muir above most fiction critics, and, having just turned the last page of *A Glastonbury Romance* as *The Listener* of July 12 came to hand, I read his review with great interest if less than agreement. He tells us that this whale of a book 'creates its own world; it has the self-subsistent quality of a work of imagination'. But I would like to ask Mr Muir is any work of imagination in fact self-subsistent? Does not the value of such a work in fact depend absolutely upon the (real, not superficial) range and profundity of its specifically human reference? And I would like to ask Mr Muir again: What and where is that reference in *A Glastonbury Romance*? Clearly he finds it, for he terms the book 'a sincerely religious vision of the world' – our world, not merely Mr Powys'. But he does not define it. I wish he had, for I have looked for it in vain. I value *War and Peace*, for it tells me with a power of perception infinitely greater than I may ever hope for, of a world and humanity such as I discern all about me, and thereby deepens my understanding, my

appreciation. I value *The Brothers Karamazov*, for therein I discover a dramatization of the desires and creative potentialities of the human heart. These books tell of realities, casting them into significant pattern. But I am baffled to find either reality or significant pattern in Mr Powys' story. It is not merely that almost all its characters belong to the case-books of psychologists – its Communists included - but they breathe an air as unreal and inconsistent as the author's own incredible cosmology. (It is no oversight when on page 80 he proffers 'material' explanation of a 'supernatural' event!) Simply, I find lacking throughout this novel the normality of either everyday life or – which is the real point – the common aspirations of humanity. And again I would ask: Does this book in fact illuminate anything more widely human than Mr Powys' own mind? If so, can Mr Muir suggest where, how, in whom and what? Frankly, I think – above all in these days – 1,174 pages need a degree of justification I have sought in vain either in the book itself or in Mr Muir's otherwise admirably balanced review.

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**Edwin Muir**

*A reply to Geoffrey West*

First published in *The Listener* 26 July 1933

The issue between Mr West and myself is really whether the book has any value at all, whether it "illuminates anything more widely human than Mr. Powys's own mind". To me it seems to do so, fitfully and uncertainly; and that is all I claim for it. The religious musings and struggles of Sam Dekker touch quite real and profound things (not always, for Mr Powys is liable to fly off at any moment into psychological melodrama). And Mr Geard, I still think, is a really impressive figure. There is little of the normality of everyday life in the book, I agree, nor is it very much concerned with the common aspirations of humanity; but the same could be said of *Crime and Punishment* or *The Possessed*, though I should never think of comparing Mr Powys's powers with those of Dostoevsky. The only point I want to make is that this effect – or quality – has to be accepted in certain novels that proceed from a religious rather than a humanistic imagination. Mr Powys's religion and Mr Powys's vision are muddled, certainly; but they occasionally clear up and then one has a glimpse of a really original mind. In saying that the book had "the self subsistent quality of a work of imagination" I merely meant that it set out to create a world imaginatively complete with all its relations worked out, instead of merely describing a section of life. This distinction, I am afraid, is a very rough and ready one, and would need to be defined far more accurately than I can try to do here, nevertheless it seems to me real and important. One of Mr Powys's worst mistakes, I think, was to make his world far too complete, and in the wrong way; hence his regrettable cosmogony. The book, indeed, is such an extraordinarily mixed one that I can sympathise with Mr West's feelings. Still, I feel that he does not quite do justice to it.

**Compton Mackenzie**  
*A heavyweight book bowed down by praise*  
*A review of A Glastonbury Romance*

We hear a great deal nowadays about long novels, but most of them are not nearly as long as their outward appearance implies. *A Glastonbury Romance* by John Cowper Powys really is a long novel. Indeed it is very little short of half a million words, or six times the length of the average seven and six penny novel published today.

Ordinarily I should have shirked attempting to digest such a mammoth; but after reading on the jacket that J. D. Beresford believed *A Glastonbury Romance* to be one of the greatest novels in the world, to be classed with Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, that Hugh Walpole considered it equal to Thomas Hardy in "power and poetry", that Gerald Barry discovered in it "the mighty pantheism of Rubens" and that Eleanor Farjeon held it to be "the greatest work of the greatest living writer in Britain" I decided that it was my inevitable duty to read it from cover to cover.

It is certainly a grandiose book, and it is sometimes genuinely impressive, but the testimony of these distinguished sponsors is as near to being nonsense as does not matter, and dangerous nonsense at that, because when uttered by such names it carries with it the glamour of sense.

"I can call spirits from the vasty deep." Owen Glendower boasted.

"Why so can I, or so can any man; but will they come when you do call for them?" Hotspur retorted.

Mr Powys with his mystical Ancient British Celticism has called upon the spirits as portentously as Glendower, but not one of them in questionable shape has appeared from the vasty deep of time to obey his summons

That lack of effective authority was perhaps excusable for unsuccessful necromancy should not be counted against a novelist; but when Mr Powys summons human creatures to move across his pages and they fail to do so he becomes as much of a failure as a novelist as he was as a necromancer.

It would be an unsporting refusal to play the game if we demanded probability from the principal characters in a romance like this; but a great creative imagination makes the improbable credible while we are under its spell. In compensation for the grotesque liberties taken with human nature we are given a rich and accurate and beautiful observation of the natural scene, but the prolixity and stiffness of the prose often destroy the effect of it.

If the sponsors of this book had been content to claim less for it, the cool headed critic might be able to grant more.

Let it be admitted, at any rate, that Mr Powys deserves admiration for the courage and endurance with which he has carried through his huge task. Let it be admitted that when he does it in King Cambyses' vein he sometimes does it as well as that particular channel of expression allows. And if there seems an intolerable deal of sack, let it be admitted that there is a lot more than one halfpennyworth of bread.

It is clear from the stirring fanfare played by the heralds of this grandiose book, that the author is capable of convincing some people that it has unusual substance, breadth and profundity. I think they are deceived. I distrust a wizard who mumbles such very elaborate incantations and hands up so many stuffed crocodiles.