

## *Editorial*

Our two covers illustrate rather different presentations of *Ducdame*, JCP's fourth, and third published, novel, as it appeared in 1925. Discussion of *Ducdame* has led to 1925 as the key to Contents this time, with views and reviews of the book, contemporary and later. This led further to contributions by Powyses to *The Dial* at that time: John Cowper on the once-so-famous Anatole France (then recently deceased), and Llewelyn on the then young (and still now admired) Edna St Vincent Millay. A year of letters between John and Theodore gives a good idea of their respective care for each other's life-illusions. Tim Blanchard's study of the earlier *Rodmoor*, as *The Art of Unhappiness*, makes a suitable preamble to the late 1920s, a time of relatively calm waters for the Powys brothers.

Within The Powys Society, Chris Thomas's inspection of the Pollinger archive reveals a decade (the 1980s) when many plans were proposed and a few achieved. A number of Powys-related books have appeared or are about to, and JCP now has a toe-hold in Ireland. The coming season promises well with meetings in Brighton in May, Dorchester in June, and the August Conference once more in Llangollen with an unusually varied programme led by our new Chairman Timothy Hyman. Many people have contributed to this newsletter and not all are mentioned. Editor is especially grateful for all their suggestions, encouragement and help.

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## *Two Powys Days*

Brighton, Saturday 14th May

At the **Friends Centre, Ship Street, Brighton**, at **2pm**, **Terry Diffey**, Emeritus Reader in philosophy at the University of Sussex, will be in conversation with **Timothy Hyman**, the distinguished painter and writer on art and Chairman of the Powys Society. Terry Diffey has spoken at past Powys Society Conferences and contributed articles to the *The Powys Review* on JCP and philosophy as well as on JCP's links with places in Sussex – see *Review* 2 (1977), 5 (1979), 8 (1981), 12 (1983), and 14 (1984). He has a professional interest in the subject of 'environmental aesthetics'. Tim Hyman has written and lectured (and painted) on Powys-related subjects over many years. Their conversation will discuss current ideas about the aesthetics of the human and natural world, with particular reference to the novels and other works of JCP.

At **7.30**, also in the Friends Centre, a 'musical and literary journey' called '**John Cowper Powys in Sussex**' will be given by the **Pastores Ensemble** as part of the Brighton Festival Fringe, in association with The Powys Society. Tickets are required for this evening event.

*See below, and enclosed leaflet, for details.*

Dorchester, Saturday 11th June

At the **Dorset County Museum**, Dorchester, at **10.30am**: a talk about **T. F. Powys** and **Llewelyn Powys**, entitled **A Hermit and an Epicurean – Two Dorset Visionaries**, presented by **Frank Kibblewhite**, webmaster of The Powys Society, and owner of the Sundial Press. The talk will cover the life in Dorset of these two writers, their familiarity with local history and topography and incorporation of it in universal themes. Frank Kibblewhite has a deep knowledge of all the Powyses and promises to give us an informed insight into the characters of Theodore and Llewelyn who, as their oldest brother John Cowper said, were very different in temperament and character, like the branches of a deep rooted tree: 'T. F. Powys has the most original sensibility and Llewelyn Powys the most idiosyncratic and winning style ...'

Frank Kibblewhite recently formed the 'Dorset Powys Group', aimed at attracting a regional non-academic audience. The Sundial Press publishes books by members of the Powys family and authors associated with them. Recent Sundial titles include a third selection of essays by Llewelyn Powys, *Christmas Lore and Legend*, and *The Joy of It* by Littleton Powys.

For more information see: <[www.sundialpress.co.uk](http://www.sundialpress.co.uk)>. See also 'News & Notes'.

At 2pm, after lunch, our Vice-Chairman **Peter Foss** will present a talk entitled **The Long Hot Edwardian Summer: Llewelyn in 1911**. There will be an opportunity for discussion, refreshments and a visit to a place of local Powysian interest.

**Both events are free** except for lunch which is optional, and the evening concert at Brighton. Anyone interested is welcome (contributions for tea/ coffee would be appreciated). If you wish to attend **please notify the Secretary** by e-mail, <chris.d.thomas@hotmail.co.uk> or by letter to Flat D, 87 Ledbury Road, London W11 2AG .

***Powys Society event in Brighton, Saturday May 14th 2011***

As a part of the **Brighton Festival Fringe**, The **Pastores Ensemble** will present an evening of readings and music, a 'musical and literary journey' called '**John Cowper Powys in Sussex**'. Readings will be taken from *Autobiography*, with musical interludes performed on lute, guitar, mandolin, viols and cello. The music includes lute music to accompany poetry by Alfred de Kantzow, and more Shakespearian echoes, Regency and Victorian pieces. It will also include the first performances of 'Eidolon Vulgaris' (from *After My Fashion*); a Powys song 'To the Ditchling Road' performed by soprano Sue Milcham; and pieces that evoke the Sussex landscape – all these by **Robert Carrington**.

**Tickets** are at a special price (£5) to those attending the Powys Day, or members of The Powys Society who wish to attend. Reservations can be made by contacting Robert <robert.carrington@tesco.net>.

The concert is to take place at the **Friends Centre, Ship Street, at 7.30pm**. It is a joint project between the Powys Society and the Pastores Ensemble (sponsored by Legal and General). The aim is to introduce the Brighton public and festival-goers to JCP with his writings about many places that locals will know. It is also hoped to gather new interest in JCP and in The Powys Society.

*Owain Glyndŵr Proclamation (see page 11).*



## AGM 2011

This gives notice that the **Annual General Meeting** of the Society will take place at **11.00am on Sunday 21st August 2011 at the Hand Hotel, Langollen.**

All members are welcome to participate in the AGM whether or not they are attending the Conference.

### *Committee Nominations*

Nominations are required for the Honorary Officers of the Society and Members of the Committee as set out below.

All paid-up members and honorary members may submit nominations. Each nomination must be made by a Proposer and a Seconder in writing, **or by e-mail**, accompanied by the Nominees' agreement.

Nominations should be sent to the Hon. Secretary, Flat D, 87 Ledbury Road, London W11 2AG

, or by e-mail to <chris.d.thomas@hotmail.co.uk>. Nominations should reach the Hon. Secretary **no later than Monday 20th June 2011.**

### **Honorary Officers**

The present Honorary Officers are:

<i>Chairman</i>	Timothy Hyman
<i>Vice Chairman</i>	Peter Foss
<i>Hon. Treasurer</i>	John Dunn
<i>Hon. Secretary</i>	Chris Thomas

The one-year term of these officers expires at the AGM on Sunday 21st August 2011 and therefore **nominations are sought for all four officers.**

### **Members of the Committee**

Anna Pawelko (Co-Conference Manager), Louise de Bruin (Conference Manager) and Trevor Davies have two years to run of their three-year term of office. Kate Kavanagh (*Newsletter* Editor) has one year to run of her three-year term of office. Stephen Powys Marks, Tim Blanchard and Michael Kowalewski will complete three years as members of the Committee. Nominations are therefore sought for **three positions on the Committee** from August 2011.

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### *Conference draft programme*

Friday 19th August

- 16.00 Arrival
- 17.30 Reception
- 18.30 Dinner
- 20.00 **Stephen Batty: 'Cold, silence, height: T. F. Powys & Friedrich Nietzsche'**, introduced by Louise de Bruin

Saturday 20th August

- 08.00 Breakfast  
0.930 **Jonas Holm Aagaard: 'Reading the Will'**, introduced by Charles Lock  
Coffee  
11.15 **Jeremy Hooker: 'On the Writings of Gerard and Mary Casey'**, introduced by Glen Cavaliero  
12.45 Lunch  
Afternoon free for expeditions  
19.00 Dinner  
20.00 **A reading of Mr. Weston's Good Wine**, adapted for voices by Kate Kavanagh

Sunday 21st August

- 08.00 Breakfast  
09.30 **Patrick Wright: 'Metal, Compost and Chalk: Reflections on English Vision and the ground beneath Llewelyn's feet'**, introduced by Timothy Hyman  
11.00 **AGM**  
12.00 A Discussion  
13.00 Lunch  
15.00 Departure

*The Powys Society Annual Conference 2011*  
*The Hand Hotel, Llangollen*  
*Friday 19th to Sunday 21st August*

'CYMRI AND CIMMERIANS'

*'... that mysterious country of the underworld of which the Greek wanderer had his vision, coming to it at last through those Cimmerian mists ...'*

We are returning once more to The Hand Hotel, beautifully set above the dark River Dee, in a landscape charged with symbolic resonance, and with a magnificent view of the hill of Dinas Bran high above. What all three Powys brothers have in common in their writing is the experience of Walking – of journeying on foot as a kind of Quest – so that each landscape will tend to take on primeval, mythic overtones. John Cowper took up the hints in Rhys and elsewhere that the Welsh 'Cymric' might be synonymous with Homer's 'Cimmerians', who lived beyond the Oceanus, in a land of fog and darkness, at the edge of the world – at the entrance to Hades. Among the few facts recorded about these mysterious Cimmerians is that one of their kings was named 'DUGDAMME'. And it is in *Dugdame* (1925) that JCP develops a mythology of 'Cimmery Land' as some longed-for retreat, a 'land of untroubled twilight', fed by

‘the memory of old, defeated, long-forgotten gods whose only immortality was in grey, cool, silent, sadly-driven mists’. We are close here to Keats’ vision of Saturn’s underground realm – the deposed god plotting his return. Twenty years after *Ducdame*, in *Obstinate Cymric*, John Cowper writes: ‘the everlasting Welsh habit has been to sink inwards’ – a dominant theme in all his Welsh fiction and, it could be argued, in the daily practice of life for both Theodore and John throughout their later years.

For better or worse that Cimmerian aspect should be less in evidence on a busy August weekend in Llangollen. Our Conference programme encompasses all three brothers. Patrick Wright will speak mainly about Llewelyn; Stephen Batty about Theodore; while Jonas Holm Aagaard will focus on one chapter of *A Glastonbury Romance*. It is a special delight to welcome again a long-absent but almost legendary Powysian, the poet Jeremy Hooker, who will speak on the writings of Mary and Gerard Casey and their relation to both Theodore and John Cowper.

### *About the Speakers*

**Jonas Holm Aagaard** wrote his Master’s thesis on JCP at the University of Copenhagen, under the supervision of Professor Charles Lock. His essay ‘John Cowper Powys: Titles’ is in *The Powys Journal* xix (2009). He is now extending his work to Powys’s contemporaries, including Dorothy Richardson, to explore theoretical issues arising out of book history and printed matter.

The Reverend Canon **Stephen Batty** is parish priest of Branksome St Aldhelm, Poole, and is a non-residentiary canon of Salisbury Cathedral. He has worked on TFP manuscripts in Dorchester (including his annotations to Nietzsche) and is planning to research the MSS of TFP’s Biblical interpretations at the Harry Ransom Center in Texas. He came to know Gerard Casey well, and conducted his funeral service at Mappowder.

**Jeremy Hooker**, poet and essayist, was an early member of The Powys Society. His first collection, *Soliloquies of a Chalk Giant*, came out in 1974, and his collected poems were published by Enitharmon in 2006. Mary Casey was the daughter of Lucy Penny and niece to all the Powys brothers. She married Gerard Casey, born in South Wales and later Will Powys’s assistant in Kenya. Both were remarkable writers in verse and in prose.

**Kate Kavanagh** joined The Powys Society in the 1980s (?) and has been *Newsletter* editor since 2001. This radio version of *Mr. Weston* was made (with P. J. Kavanagh) in the 1970s, for an enthusiastic, but ultimately powerless, BBC producer at Bristol. It is almost entirely in dialogue lifted straight from the book. A small group at Dorchester enjoyed reading it in 2008, and we hope it will find favour with a larger audience at Llangollen, equipped with lively imaginations.

**Patrick Wright** is a cultural historian and journalist with a long-standing interest in the Powyses as one strand in that weird tapestry of Utopians and prophets that took shape in southern England between the wars. His many chronicles of absurd cultural collisions range from *The Village that Died for England* (about Tyneham in Dorset) to *Journey through Ruins* (about Dalston Lane in east London). In 2001 Patrick Wright collaborated with Timothy Hyman on the Tate's Stanley Spencer retrospective. His most recent book, *Passport to Peking*, centres on a mission to China in 1954 that included both Spencer and A. J. Ayer.



*Patrick Quigley reading at the Irish Polish Society.*

### *First Powys Lecture in Ireland*

November 22nd, 2010. It's a bleak November night in Dublin with the rain beating against the tall windows of a Georgian house. Teams from the IMF are going through the balance sheets as Ireland faces ruin. The city is full of rumours that the Irish Government is about to fall. It doesn't seem an auspicious night for a discussion on literature. But the challenging outlook and philosophy of John Cowper Powys may be even more relevant for people in a dark time. The lecture in the Irish Polish Society building is on '*A Glastonbury Romance: the Novel and the Grail*'. The mixed Irish and Polish audience are reminded that they are taking part in a historic event – the first public lecture on the Powys family in Ireland.

The audience, with the exception of a visitor from Weymouth, are new to the subject, and the lecture is accompanied by a slideshow presented by the Vice-Chairman of the Irish Polish Society, Anna Swezc. The lecture starts with Powys's life leading up to the writing of his 'book on Glastonbury as has never been writ of any place before'. The book is examined in detail, leading to a review of Powys's ideas and their relevance for the Twenty-first Century. His work is strongly focussed on the individual, but he is political in the broadest sense – in his concern for freedom from oppression. The quest for the Grail can be linked to his emphasis on individual self-development. In the novel those who see the Grail have achieved a high degree of enlightenment, knowledge of the life beyond the self. The spiritual life may be seen as a higher level of existence, but is also part of life's daily struggle.

The meeting considered a number of Irish connections with John Cowper Powys. He once wrestled with his brother, Littleton, who had sneered at the role of the Irish Parliamentary Party. In New York in the 1920s he was close to the Irish poet, Padraic Colum, and defended Joyce's *Ulysses* in a US court. *A Glastonbury Romance* makes many references to performers from the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, in the preparations for the pageant.

The Irish poet and critic, Padraic Fallon, was fascinated with Powys's work; he reviewed *Weymouth Sands* in the 1930s and wrote a long perceptive appreciation of *Porius* in 1951 where he talked of Powys as a Titan among writers 'with a might of presentation to keep the Gods moving among men'. He suggested that Powys's technique of accumulation can be as effective as the more usual habit of selection.

The meeting ends with a discussion on the Grail and its connection to Celtic mythology. Several people question why Powys's wide output is unavailable in Irish bookshops. Many of the books from the Powys family were banned in Ireland on initial publication. Powys wasn't widely read in the country and was considered part of a trinity of English regional writers. His universal qualities were unrecognized.

While reading JCP still appears, for some, a daunting prospect, a seed has been sown. Despite, or because of, the social havoc caused by bank bailouts and budget cutbacks, people need a strong 'life-illusion'. No matter what happens in the social and political arena, a meeting will be held in Dublin in 2011 to discuss one of Powys's more accessible novels, *Weymouth Sands*.

Details can be had from: <patquig2002@yahoo.com>

**Patrick Quigley**

## *News and Notes*

### **Brighton, Saturday May 14th** (See page 2)

Our visit to Brighton provides an opportunity to re-imagine JCP in his early days when he was experimenting with literary fiction, writing 'imitative verse' and learning the art of public speaking. Before attending the afternoon event there will be time to follow in JCP's footsteps in search of places he writes about in *Autobiography*, such as the colossal front, the steep shelving beach where every boat seemed to bear the name of 'Skylark', Southwick, Portslade, the site of the old Town Hall in Hove, where he delivered his first lecture, and, further away, Lewes and Court House, near Offham, on the B2116. Visitors may wish to take the fine walk from Cooksbridge, through Warningore Wood, to Court House. A path winds round beside the house to Mount Harry on the high ridges of the downs (see *NL* 58, July 2006). For more details of JCP's life in East Sussex see Chapters Six and Seven of *Autobiography*, and Kieran McCann's website at: <[www.kpmc.fsnet.co.uk/jcp](http://www.kpmc.fsnet.co.uk/jcp)>. See also *la lettre powysienne* 17, Spring 2009.

[Chris Thomas]



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Patrick Quigley gave a **lecture in Dublin** on 22nd November 2010, on ‘*A Glastonbury Romance: the Novel and the Grail*’ (see page 7).

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*la lettre powysienne 20* (autumn 2010 – bilingual as usual) was dedicated to Sven Erik Täckmark, who died in 2007. It contains a long review article on Sven Erik’s translation into Swedish of *Autobiography* (‘Who’s Afraid of John Cowper Powys’) by Crister Enander, and two long articles on JCP and Dostoevsky, by Elmar Schenkel and Angelika Reichmann (relating to her talk at the 2009 Conference); also a comment by Bill Keith on the excellence of JCP’s translations in his *Rabelais*, with some added information about George Lewin the bookseller (friend of JCP at Corwen during the war, and of Cecil Woolf). Shorter pieces are on Jean Wahl, Professor of Philosophy at the Sorbonne who admired JCP (with a previously unseen photograph of JCP, in a belted overcoat), and on communism, JCP and Tony Judt, historian of French twentieth-century history.

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**Powys, Indian culture and worship** is a new essay by Jacqueline Peltier on her Powys-Lannion website, examining JCP’s affinities with the Mohawks, previous inhabitants of Phudd Hill.

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Bill Keith’s expanded version of his *Reader’s Companion to Porius* is now available on both the Peltier (powys-lannion) and The Powys Society websites.

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*The Religion of a Sceptic* has been published in Italy by Adelphi. The Italian title is *La Religione di Uno Scettico*. [JP]

★ ★ ★ ★

A Dutch translation of a JCP story, **The Owl, The Duck, Miss Rowe! Miss Rowe!** has been published in Holland’s leading cultural magazine *De Gids* (2011/2). This translation is by Maaïke Post and Arjen Mulder, and has the title ‘De uil, de eend en juffrouw Rowe! Juffrouw Rowe!’.

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**A Struggle for Life**, a new collection of **Llewelyn essays** edited by **Anthony Head**, is published by OneWorld Classics (review next time).

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*Patterns on the Sand*, a previously unpublished novel by **Gamel Woolsey**, will be issued in paperback by the **Sundial Press** on 29th April 2011. (ISBN 978-1-908274-03-8); also this spring, a reprint of David Garnett’s *The Sailor’s Return* (1925, inspired by the Chaldon inn-sign), introduced by J. Lawrence Mitchell.

★ ★ ★ ★

**Awe-Inspiring Hideousness: Powys’s Great Twentieth-Century Novel of the Fifth Century** is the title of a review of the new *Porius* by Nicholas Birns (Eugene Lang College, the New School, New York). Read it on  
<[www.nietzschecircle.com/hyperion1049.html](http://www.nietzschecircle.com/hyperion1049.html)>

★ ★ ★ ★

**Steven Amsterdam** (American living in Melbourne, author of *Things We Didn't See Coming*, a prizewinning 'apocalyptic' novel, 2009) was asked to select five books on the theme of 'Worry'. *Wolf Solent* heads the list, in company with Stefan Zweig's *Beware of Pity*, *Lolita*, Joan Didion and Philip Roth. Of JCP he says

He was born in the 1870s, which meant he suffered the shocks of a new noisy century when he was old enough to worry properly. His medium was more existential angst and self-doubt, offering an antithesis to Whitman's universe-embracing enthusiasm. ... Our hero, Wolf Solent, is, coincidentally, an extremely sensitive soul, alive to every blade of grass and housefly, and he suffers for it ... For an adult, Wolf has epiphanies with the frequency of a 15-year-old, which leaves him perpetually resolute and perpetually changing his mind ...

[Anna Blundy, editor of fivebooks.com.]

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**News from Nebraska.** 'The lonely book', a dance-theatre 'dialogue' based on *A Philosophy of Solitude*, was recently performed at the Haymarket theatre, Lincoln, Nebraska, USA. The veteran dancer **Daniel Kubert** credited this book for his recovery and remission from serious illness. The exquisite choreography by Kubert, who also performed, conveyed meditation and contemplation – abstract, slow, sincere – along with joy and tranquillity.

[Tim Blanchard]

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**Stevie Smith and Authorship** by William May mentions her poem 'I Remember', inspired by Littleton's account of his wedding night with Elizabeth Myers in *Still the Joy of It* (1956) – its references to the bride with TB and the bombers overhead taken more literarily and less literally by Stevie S's interpreters. She is also quoted as finding difficult her reputation with review editors for 'knowing about John Cowper Powys' – 'This put me off, awfully. I felt I could not live up to it'; and May notes that she made 'informed parodies' of JCP (and Wordsworth, among others). Her little poem on JCP, however, rings true: '*This old man is sly and wise, / He knows the truth, he tells no lies. / He is as deep as a British pool / And Monsieur Poop may think him a fool.*'

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**Chaldon Herring Festival: A celebration of a Dorset Village** will take place on **Saturday, 6th August 2011.**

A one-day event consisting of talks on literary Chaldon (members of the Powys family, Sylvia Townsend Warner & Valentine Ackland, David Garnett and distinguished visitors), guided walks and an evening concert in St Nicholas Church with supper in the village hall. Speakers will include Judith Stinton, author of *Chaldon Herring: Writers in a Dorset Landscape*.

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**Peter Foss's** account of his involvement in establishing the site of the Battle of Bosworth has been published in the *Jesus College Record* (Oxford) 2010.

## *Owain Glyndŵr's Proclamation*

by John Cowper Powys

In Dr Morine Krisdóttir's introduction to JCP's *Owen Glendower* there is a reference to the author being asked in 1939 to write 'the proclamation scene of Owen Glendower' for the Carrog Pageant. Carrog is a small Welsh village some two miles from Cae Coed, Corwen, JCP's home whilst he wrote *Owen Glendower*. The village has many historical connections to Glyndŵr, being the site of one of his dwellings on the edge of the Berwyn Mountains, Owain Glyndŵr's Mount and the site of Carchardy Owain Glyndŵr (= 'Owain Glyndŵr's Prison House'). There is also a field which bears the name Cae'r Llys (= 'Court Field').

JCP was acknowledged at the time locally as an authority on Owain Glyndŵr and had been asked by the local Cymmrodorion Society to lecture on the subject. At that time, in the 1930's/40's, Owain Glyndŵr was not the totemic figure that he now appears throughout modern Wales. Locally though there was a strong interest in the history and folk memories of Glyndŵr. In 1932 the newly built village hall in Glyndyfrdwy was named Neuadd Goffa Owain Glyndŵr (Owain Glyndŵr Memorial Hall) and incorporates as its foundation stone a slab from Carchardy Owain Glyndŵr.

In early 2010 we had been looking for a different way of celebrating the anniversary of Owain Glyndŵr's 1400 Proclamation in the village and decided to search for the script, if it still existed. Nobody in the village appeared to have ever heard of it and there was no record in the school log. Pupils of the class of 1939 had certainly not practised or performed the piece and even the mention of a pageant drew a blank. Eventually, though, a handwritten translation into Welsh was discovered in the Gwynedd County Archive in Dolgellau. The translation had been deposited with papers of the late W. D. Williams, who was the Carrog head-teacher in 1939. It seems that JCP must have written the original in English for his friend W. D. Williams to translate into Welsh for a performance in that language by his pupils.

The front page states:

Translation of the Proclamation Scene of Owain Glyndŵr, September 1400 (by John Cowper Powys). Note: The Pageant was not performed because the Second World War broke out in September 1939. Before three years had passed the two producers, W. E. Thomas and W. D. Williams had left Edeyrnion, the first to Talybont, the second to Barmouth.

Nothing was heard of the Pageant again.

The 'script' was only some 10 foolscap pages long including stage instructions and was to present numerous challenges. Eventually it was decided to make the production fully bilingual and in the true spirit of the original that the main body of the cast would come from the same school for which JCP had originally written the pageant. Other voices would be supplied by village residents. The performance could not be on the actual September anniversary as the pupils would not have returned from

summer holidays in time to practice. But on November 11th 2010, JCP's *Owain Glyndŵr Pageant* had its world première performance after lying dormant and unknown for seventy years.

Neuadd Carrog was dressed up as a medieval court and the cast of forty children all wore period clothing hired from a local re-enactment society. The parts of Owain Glyndŵr, Tudur ap Gruffudd Fychan, Hywel Cyffin, Gruffudd and Philip Hanmer, Crach Ffinant, Gruffudd Llwyd, Owain's wife Margaret and daughter Catrin and all his subjects were played with great enthusiasm by the children, with voice parts being supplied by Carrog residents. Mrs Valmai Webb introduced the pageant to a packed hall for both dress rehearsal and main performance. Although there were no musical instructions with the original, the producers Bronwen Lebbon, Sw Jones and Fiona Collins had selected Karl Jenkins' 'Armed Man: A Mass for Peace' for the overture and at the close the whole cast left the stage with banners flying whilst singing Dafydd Iwan's 'Yma o Hyd' ('I'm always here'). It was quite an emotional evening for an audience which included Dr Bryn Williams, W. D. Williams' son.

I am indebted to Dr. Krissdóttir for her assistance and encouragement in helping to find and bring to life a small fragment of JCP's output in the area in which he spent such a significant period of his life.

**Ian Lebbon**

*The photographs on pages 3 and 52 are from Ian Lebbon.*

*There are a few references to the Pageant in JCP's diary:*

29 March, 1939 [*'The Old' had died the day before*]: Mr. Williams of Carrog writes about a Pageant Ynghorwen in Oct., & for me to send a Dialogue about Owen's Coronation. "Yng Ngharrag". 30 March, 1939: Mr. Williams of Carrog came about the Pageant to include Owen's coronation which he wants me to write something for. 3 April, 1939: The T.T. wants me to finish Chapter XVI [of *Owen Glendower*] before I start on the new Preface to Culture-Book & a new conclusion yes a new conclusion & also that Pageant scene for Corwen. 1 May, 1939: I finished last night the Proclamation scene of Owen Glyndwr for the October Pageant invented by W. D. Williams Schoolmaster of Carrog. ... The T.T. did like my Pageant Scene — but made a few improvements. Only a few tiny little sprays of green on our 5 beeches. They are all five Wintry brown still & on the 1st of May! Finished the Pageant Scene — & Mr. Williams came for it ... I met him on the bridge. 17 May, 1939: Then in my heaviest coat & with 3 Scarves & gaiters — weighing in spite of my thin & brittle bones about a ton — I went up — a perambulating scarecrow of vestures from many quarters — like the scarecrow in the witty verses of the Schoolmaster of Carrog our excellent Pageant-Master (Mr. Williams). 21 June, 1939: Nance wants to act in the Pageant.

*(Thanks to Roger Jones, Ian Lebbon, Joan Stevens, Morine Krissdóttir and Chris Thomas. KK)*

# Ducdame

## *Ducdame in Hampstead*

A small group gathered in the Friends' Meeting House at Hampstead on 23rd October to discuss *Ducdame*. Chris Thomas had prepared an attractive handout with maps and illustrations: following leads in John Cowper Powys's 1929 Diary, he had identified the village of Ashover in the novel with Charminster near Dorchester, with Wolfeton House convincingly matched with Ashover House. This planting of the novel in a real Dorset location was seen as important for a novel that is so rooted in landscape.

Glen Cavaliero has called *Ducdame* one of Powys's 'most rewarding' books, and Chris Thomas opened the discussion by asserting that it is not just a transitional work. It is a novel with a particularly strong evocation of the spirit of place and of the influence of landscape on character. It has a characteristic atmosphere of brooding melancholy, frustrated desire, and emotional entanglement. It nevertheless remains a life-affirming work, with an overwhelming sense of benevolence. The description of the love between the two Ashover brothers, Rook and Lexie, inspired by John Cowper's relationship with Llewelyn, is particularly moving. Chris recalled how important Llewelyn was for the writing of *Ducdame*: John Cowper would read the novel aloud to his brother as it progressed.

Chris did however question whether the novel has a strong sense of dramatic development, and wondered if there were not a vein of misogyny. He quoted one of the few surviving early reviews by, of all people, William Faulkner, who wrote in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* on 22nd March 1925 (*see page 22*).

Characters like Rook and his women, and Lexie and the women he did not have, should be put in play form — just the dialogue, to be read. But to write them in against a background of quiet, lovely English country defeats its own ends. 'The characters', wrote Faulkner, 'dub along without significance.' [*'Dub' again!* — *see NL 45, pages 12 and 17 – KK*]

Timothy Hyman found an excess of fine nature writing in the book; Chris Thomas found *Ducdame*'s evocation of natural life its most impressive quality. Kate Kavanagh added that there was anyway much more variety of nature in the countryside a century ago.

John Hodgson felt that there was some justice in William Faulkner's review, that there was a mismatch between the beauty of *Ducdame*'s landscape with its natural rhythms and the plot, which is a story of manipulative human relationships among characters who are mostly transplanted from the city. The interpenetration of thought and landscape which is so characteristic of mature Powys was not quite achieved in *Ducdame*.

Chris Thomas drew attention to the book's dedication to Kwang-Tse, whose philosophical humour Powys praised in a critical essay written at about the same

time as *Ducdame* (see *The Powys Review* vii). John Dunn felt that Rook Ashover, despite his leisured life, protested a sense of victimhood too strongly; others felt that his brother Lexie seemed much more alive. Timothy Hyman also found Rook hard to identify with. There are vestiges of a dandified swagger in his character, and in his dealings with women he tends to a proprietary *droit de seigneur*.

The discussion then focussed on Rook Ashover's hallucinatory vision of his son, an angel or seraph of the kind so prominent in Wilson Knight's readings of Powys. There were hints of John Cowper's own son here (aged about 20 at the time of writing): KK wondered if there were *any* aspects of John Cowper's fiction that were not traceable to his life – even more so than with most novelists.

The American edition of *Ducdame* includes a map, which some readers found unnecessary and other helpful, despite its rather odd (American) imagining of English buildings. Everybody wished there could be a map for *Porius*, indeed for all the novels set in real places.

**John Hodgson**

## ***Ducdame: Shifting Light***

In Chris Thomas's leaflet 'Charminster' there are two quotations from John Cowper Powys's diary for 1929:

Walked to Poundbury ... saw in the distance the scene of *Ducdame* (20th July)  
and

Walked with Lulu and Alyse to meet Littleton ... Past Poundbury and Charminster  
(the site of *Ducdame*). (1st August)

'Scene' and 'site' narrow the common ground between Charminster and 'Ashover' a little, both words establishing the influence of the place but neither suggesting that Charminster was, in any sense, a 'model' for the book. Actuality was never more than a starting point for Powys.

Under the heading 'Ashover village' in the leaflet, is this passage from *Ducdame*:

At this particular hour its little mass of roofs and walls presented the appearance of a miniature city in some old steel engraving. Rook stared in half-ashamed sadness. How little he knew, he to whom the place had given its name, of the actual thoughts, of the actual dreams, that went on under those projecting eaves and contorted chimneys.

John Cowper Powys was in the United States when he wrote this passage which describes far more the 'Ashover' of his mind than any actual place. It anticipates mental landscapes described in *Wolf Solent* – the 'mysterious town' of Wolf's imagining at the end of the 'Yellow Bracken' chapter, and Christie's

I regard each philosophy, not as a truth, but just as a particular country, in which I can go about — countries with their own peculiar light, their Gothic buildings, their pointed roofs, their avenues of trees ...

The nature writing in *Ducdame* is unequalled in Powys's work: a world of nature at once unreal yet accurate and authentic, it can astonish and enchant. John Cowper

came to Dorchester at the age of seven, an age when, often, children view the world with peculiar clarity and with deep, direct but uncomplicated feeling. He would have walked far at that time, and for the next years until he went to school at thirteen, taken in sights and sounds to be held in his memory and shaped by his imagination.

In the Hampstead discussion (*see above*) *Ducdame* was said to evoke the spirit of the place and to have a 'characteristic atmosphere of brooding melancholy'. But the mood of Ashover changes throughout the story and while there is very much a sense of place 'responsive to every varying shift of wind and weather' (chapter I), brooding melancholy is only felt, for any length of time, by the (melancholy) Rook. The dominant mood of the novel is rather one of restlessness and apprehension, quite to be expected in the emotional chaos that prevails. William Faulkner's notion of a mismatch between the beauty of nature and unpleasant human behaviour in *Ducdame* is curious. Powys uses the contrasts as well as the correspondences between the moods of nature and people to dramatic effect, while the beauty of his description is consistent. The presence of beauty is perhaps the book's strongest unifying feature.

Though he suggests a close supernatural interaction between certain of his characters and the forces of nature, Powys never subscribes to the romantic idea of Beauty and Goodness in association which Faulkner's notion implies. In *Ducdame* the immorality of humankind is shown simply for what it is, side by side with the detached amorality of nature. Wind howls, rain lashes; the scene is never unlovely. Mrs Ashover's ruthless drive to perpetuate her tribe resembles the maternal instinct of the badger on the hill, differing only in its 'crack-pot' human arrogance.

John Cowper Powys would have enjoyed creating Rook Ashover to fit his idea of the indulgence-deserving character he sees as Chuang-Tse's. The cultural chasm of time and space between Chuang's world and Powys's Ashover – the possible interpretations of action and inaction alone – present complexities too great for the quirky rational comparison to ring true. It may well betray an irresolution which colours the whole novel and betrays itself in its lapses into Gothicism and melodrama. *Ducdame* has more in it of Platonism than Taoism, though Chuang's famous saying on the horns of Provocation and Folly would be apt.

It is the second prefatory quotation which captures the spirit of the book:

What's that "ducdame"?

'Tis a Greek invocation to call fools into a circle ...

(*As You Like It*, II vi)

Folly appears as often in the text of *As You Like It* as in *Ducdame*. Nature, in her moods and seasons, blesses, taunts and interacts with players on both stages. Time is a common central theme: Time, like Nature, mocking dreams of men, and having the last word.

A certain unity which emerges in *Ducdame* comes to be realised in *Wolf Solent*. The heroes of both books are deeply troubled men, one whose dreamlike beatific vision fades, its prophecy fulfilled only after his death by drowning, the other who, looking at a field of buttercups with newly opened eyes, finds Saturnian gold.

Each of John Cowper Powys's books is, like Christie's various philosophies, a different country. The peculiar light of *Wolf Solent* bathes its entire scene. The country of *Ducdame* is played upon by a more shifting light no less its own.

Cicely Hill

### ***Revisiting Ashover***

Recalling *Ducdame*'s doom-laden hero, it was surprisingly pleasant to re-enter this enclosed, sun-warmed, in-turned, feudal domain where nature and seasons rule, untroubled by the social norms of other novels. Brothers meet by moonlight, at two o'clock in the morning. The Squire – unmarried, unoccupied – shares his ancestral bedroom, in his mother's house, with his girlfriend, a former barmaid. The poor nihilist vicar, doomed from the start to run mad, seems a most unlikely clergyman. There is an attendant chorus of misbegotten relations, stagey yokels and a clairvoyant crone. We can take Powys's word that all this is not untrue to life, in that timeless time – about 1910? – when skirts were long, roads dusty, houses candle-lit.

The Dorset landscape is soft and fertile. Rain, snow, sun, trees and flowers seem more substantial than the human characters, borne as those are on the winds of impulse (as the epigraphs, from Kwang-Tse and Melancholy Jacques, suggest): fooled by chance, their fates unpredictable as twigs on a stream. The book moves through a year's seasons as the lives respond: from Rook and the dissolving moon, Netta and the tossing wind, Nell recalling salt-marsh pools in a bloody sunset, Ann's energy fuelled by Spring, Hastings and the deceptions of darkness. Lexie – by far the most believable character – responds to everything, riding the roundabout of destiny.

The actual plot tends to the operatic (Netta's sacrifice recalling *La Traviata*). Rook, at the centre, devoid of 'ordinary' human feelings, is hard to envisage in natural terms – too easy to explain him as a victim of his class, arrested in childhood, oppressed by his father, yearning to return to carefree days in the sun with his adored little brother, his one true love. He speculates on the meanings of life, but reveals no everyday adult interests and we do not see him talking to Netta, for instance. His one night with his cousin, Drool's beer or no, seems unbelievably foolhardy, knowing her designs on him – too easy, again, to imagine subconscious motives. But as the book goes on this unreality grows to seem the whole point. Rook is a radar screen, a receiver of messages from earth and sky, of one being with his little kingdom of hills and stream. The beautiful scene of the angelic vision of his son is no surprise.

Once Rook is gone, the epilogue seems contrived. Are we to suppose that Lexie and Nell might also continue the Ashover line? Trivial, but tempting, to escape the time-warp and fantasise, in line with other more ordinary novels of golden years *avant le déluge*, that in a few years Rook (and Hastings) would in any case have ended in the trenches, with Lady Ann organising Ashover House as a hospital for officers, assisted by nurses Netta and Nell. And little John would have been the right age for the Battle of Britain.

Kate Kavanagh



## Ducdame — *How They Saw It*

(with thanks to Chris Thomas, ingenious researcher)

*Ducdame* was published on January 13th 1925 in New York, July 29th in London. JCP, then better known in America, gets some respectful coverage, often comparing him with Lawrence. Not, however, from Katherine Anne Porter (in *New York Herald Tribune*, 5th July), with her severe standards of craftsmanship and ‘truth to life’. She distinguished between spontaneous ‘Whitman-minded’ and careful ‘James-minded’ writers, preferring the latter, but castigates Powys on all counts, particularly disliking his classical comparisons – ‘from a great store of reference and recollection ... he describes and explains and agitates, but nothing breathes or stirs ... The story remains untold, disguised and corrupted with words ...’ (‘BG’ in *The New Republic* does not even try: *Ducdame* ‘bears out its name too literally ... The life it presents is so witless a maze that it seems hardly worth recording.’)

Over in Los Angeles, Powys’s admirer Paul Jordan-Smith\* entices readers of *Sunday Times Literary Page* (May 3) with the heading, beneath a photograph, ‘A Study of Abnormality’. But: ‘Anything from the pen of John Cowper Powys is interesting ...’ (though he ranks *Ducdame* below *Wood and Stone*), and ‘the book, for all its study of abnormality, its grotesque, Gothic, twisted souls, is a beautiful thing ...’

Powys flings gorgeous words into his novels, plays with them, caresses them, even as he does on the platform, where he is the master artist of our English-speaking world. ‘Preparturient fallowness’, ‘Saurian viciousness’, ‘Superincumbent oceans of blackness’, ‘corrugated Claudian brows’ and the like are but commonplace in his curiously-wrought pages. But there is nothing cloudy in the style, which is singularly beautiful and adjusts itself to his moods like a well-hung garment.

The *New York Times* (15 Feb 1925) treated *Ducdame* to a magisterial opening:

Those who hold that much reading, especially if it be of a critical or scholarly nature, is likely to disturb seriously, if not actually sterilize, any creative impulse, must be infuriated by the refutation [*sic*] of John Cowper Powys. There are few writers so inveterately committed to “adventuring among masterpieces,” and few who write so easily. If the author of “*Ducdame*” has seemingly drawn from his contacts chiefly a grand manner in style and a heroic proportions in content, he has at least contributed a vitality and a complexity of expertly handled subtle recognitions that are equal to the frame.

A cursory glance would indicate that Mr Powys has enlisted the glamorous countryside, the mouldering churchyard ... the lingering feudal spirit ... to an end made venerable in romances ...

and after a sensitive run through the plot and themes, ends with:

The defeat of Rook is inevitable, yet is accomplished with an absorbing accumulation and triangulation of suspense ... In the end, the principle of survival has been affirmed ... as death-energy and sterility, Mr Powys seems to say, must go before the unconquerable will to live.

Young William Faulkner treats *Ducdame* with interest (*see page 22*). This review was identified only in 1950. Its discoverer (Carvel Collins) dismisses the book as a dull and awkward precursor of *Wolf Solent* and *The Meaning of Culture*, despite its awareness of nature ... one of the chief features of the novel, which as much as anything else is a running report on landscape, wild flower, insect, weather, puff-ball fungus, and bird call.

Faulkner's editor suggests that Powys may have agreed with this verdict and eliminated the book from his CV. A few aspects of the book might just have affected Faulkner – its poetic impulses, the influence of ancestors, the use of myth, the receding figure of a young man on a horse (in Faulkner's story 'Carcassonne'), a significant clearing in the woods (in 'The Bear').

Finally, a 'Briefer Mention' from *The Dial* in New York in May 1925. *Ducdame* appears in company with Liam O'Flaherty, H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett.

In this novel we may study the exaltation of physical consciousness as we have it in Rook Ashover for whose love three women simultaneously contend. Estranged from him by his detachment — by "an irresistible attraction" on his part "to the feminine body and mind with an absolute lack of emotional passion," which finds expression in the phenomenon of lovemaking rather than in the blasting power of love — we are not moved by the tragedy of his murder, even dramatically timed as it is to coincide with the birth of his son. By the precision of certain similes, by the black magic — the static flicker — of a proud and prompt imagination, by the author's passion for the "mysterious, inviolable" beauty of nature, we are genuinely moved.

★

More grudging, or mystified, or hostile, but also appreciative reviews appeared on home territory.

*Spectator* of London (22nd August 1925 – 'Gloom in the Hedgerows') sees the author, like his hero, as torn between two opposed traditions of countryside novelists, pretty or perverse ('there has been a surfeit lately of gloomy and distorted books about villages ...') The excessively gloomy element in *Ducdame* (idiot boys, lightning-struck trees, etc) is deplored,

but so gifted and sensitive a person as this author need not go out of his way to dilate on them when he can equally well exalt us instead with a vision of that beauty and rightness in life in which he himself believes so strongly. ... When he follows his intuition ... he can suggest the subtle degrees and half-tones of many diverse and enthralling kinds of human emotions amazingly well, and write vividly and with power ... *Ducdame* is, in spite of everything, a good and intelligent novel.

Gerald Bullett\*\* in *The Saturday Review* (also 22nd August) is the most scornful, especially of the exclamation marks, 'an unmistakeable sign of mediocrity'. 'Here and there ... one finds flashes of an independent vision, but the book as a whole is commonplace ...', 'Mr Powys has ideas, but ninety percent of them are trite'. As for Rook, 'Frankly, it is difficult to interest oneself in a man who is utterly lacking in common sense and possesses no qualities to compensate us for the deficiency.'

*The Nation & The Athenaeum* (12 September 1925) takes it as a first novel, in which one can watch, for its own sake, a powerful talent sincerely at work, misdirected, confused, yet interesting. The style, rich, involved, precise in image, sinks at times into depths of badness. Predominant idea, emotion and violent solution are at variance, but the total effect, if unsatisfactory, is at least individual ... grim irony and pressure of thought retain our attention.

'Confusion, but ...' is also the note in the *TLS*: 'the immediate effect ... though powerful, is as confusing as that of the supposed Greek, or Celtic, invocation' of the title. 'The forcible union of idea and situation is disturbing'. The brothers' meeting by moonlight, is 'an environment that seems the more unnatural as it is appropriate'. Rook is 'introspective to a degree hardly sane'. Dorset is 'a country of the mind, and by a compelling pathetic fallacy nature echoes and completes the narrow ring of moods.' 'There is sound workmanship and constructive power in the book, but the dual mode is uncertain. We are left with the impression of a harsh plot forced into a narrow mould of ideas.'

Milton Waldman\*\*\* in *London Mercury* (September) notes that *Ducdame* is nearly twice the length of 'the average novel to which we are accustomed', reminiscent of the leisurely fiction of the nineteenth century. The *dramatis personae* is 'worthy of Trollope's attention'; but (the chief reason for the book's length) none is ever quite independent of the author's supporting arm, as their extravagant actions continually force him explain, *ex post facto*, the psychology that impelled them. 'Mr Powys also, following Mr Lawrence, devotes long passages to finding sexual meanings in landscape or other associations'. His feeling for landscape may not always be convincing, but he has 'a real power of conception on a large scale, a faculty of seeing logically down long corridors of time and viewing in proportion the pettiness of temporarily absorbing events in relation to their ultimate significance'.

\* **Paul Jordan Smith** (1885–1971): see his reminiscences in NL 69, p. 21. *JCP* used to stay with him in California. He is mentioned in Autobiography (543: 'this learned young editor of the *Anatomy of Melancholy* and his magnanimous partner ...') and in a letter to Bonnie Grainger in *We Lived in Patchin Place*, where Anthony Head's note tells us that Jordan-Smith dedicated his 1927 book on Ulysses to *JCP*; that his 1934 memoirs contain a chapter on the Powyses; and that he acted as intermediary in the sale of the MS of Wolf Solent.

\*\* **Gerald Bullett** (1893–1958) In 1925 he had published a study of Whitman, and the first of many stories, often supernatural. An admired anthologist.

\*\*\* **Milton Waldman** (1893 (USA) –1958) later known as a historical writer and editor responsible for the publication of Tolkien.

## 'Ducdame' (*Arden Shakespeare note*)

Possibly nonsense or deliberate mystification. It replaces the 'Come hither' chorus of the verse it is parodying. The original last verse-line ('But winter and rough weather') is in Melancholy Jaques's version *An if he will come TO me*— accent on TO for the rhythm, so maybe the third *Ducdame* is *Duc-DA-me*. Could be Latin/Italian *Duc da me* ('lead (him) away from me', a reversal of 'come hither') — or Cymric (= Welsh?) *dewch da mi*, 'come to me', 'once current in children's games'. (see also p.5, 'DUGDAMME')

## Ducdame – *in our time*

Morine Krissdóttir's *Magical Quest* (1980) sees *Ducdame* in terms of the mythology of the psyche, in symbols that *unconsciously* appear in the story. In the pattern of evolution of the Hero, Rook is an adolescent struggling against the Great Mother: in his doomed attempt to escape into the country of the mind, Cimmery-land, and in his conflict with Hastings as the split-off, deathly 'twin' aspect of his own personality. The Mother wins, his death is self-willed, but he has achieved 'a small step forward to consciousness, light, "masculinity"', and is rewarded by the vision of his son, a saviour god (57–63). In *Descents of Memory* (2007) she places the book as a turning away from real-life New York on his doorstep, described in the then unpublished *After My Fashion* (written 1920), and with a backward glance at early attempts like 'Owen Prince'; with JCP *consciously* introducing, from his recent reading, themes from mythology (the Mother-Goddess and the hero/son struggling for autonomy) and the psychology of women (often raised in the novel and discussed in letters to Phyllis). Other recurring themes are of non-sexuality, and the other-worldly land of Cimmeria (a private myth of Phyllis herself).

H. P. Collins (*Old Earth-Man*, 1966 – the title compares Powys with Tolstoy) calls *Ducdame* 'the nearest approach in John Cowper's fiction to the common forms of the novel ... the easiest to read ... But that does not mean that the book is easy. Again we feel it is the work of a man possessed, but again we have to ask: possessed by what? ... Metaphysical dilemmas abound and overlap.' Powys is seen in his time, compared and contrasted with Lawrence; the concepts of 'anti-hero' and 'Freudian loading of character' still then new for readers and mystifying contemporary reviewers. Collins detects an influence of Hardy ('never afterwards quite so strong'), and 'the gulf still yawns between self-comprehension and imaginative comprehension:', but *Ducdame* 'remains an unforgettable landmark, one whose direction is unmistakable ... There is no concession to either the conventional or the modish ...'

'It is by his novels, where he has explored the forgotten riches of the Earth our Mother and given freely from his intimate communion with her, that he will enrich, more and more, generations for whom most of the art of our day will diminish as the experience out of which it springs is seen to be restricted. JCP is the founder of no school, but the fertiliser of all possible futures. (58–62, 220)

G. Wilson Knight in *The Saturnian Quest* (1964, 1978) emphasises the powers of ancestral earth-ghosts in the book, and the numinous atmosphere flowing from its earthly setting; its unusually varied assortment of flowers and animals; its 'wood-magic', seasons and weather: 'the prevailing effect is one of beneficence... a sense of nature ... blending ... into some more "etherialised chemistry", making a semi-mental world more beautiful than ours ...' Rook interprets old Betsy's 'Cimmery land' as 'confused reports of some real Elysian Fourth Dimension ... "where large and liberating thoughts moved to and fro over cool, wet grass like enormous swallows" ... In such descriptions the mind-nature opacity is being broken, or

dissolved; in in experiences of this dissolution, Rook attains liberation from his torments ...'

For Knight, *Ducdame* is notable for its realisation of ancestral powers and a strong woman as agents of life; for our first Powys study of a dark magician (Hastings) ... and for its pervading sense of earth-nature etherealised, blending into sense of an etheric dimension. (26–9)

For Glen Cavaliero (*John Cowper Powys: Novelist*, 1973) *Ducdame* is 'a significant and rewarding novel', an 'elegy for the solitary romantic spirit.' It is JCP's 'most compact and tightly constructed novel. In none of the others is he so responsive to the moods and rhythms of nature, and none of them leaves so vivid a recollection of their setting ... Indeed the human drama is so informed by them as to be almost secondary in its effect.' What Wilson Knight calls 'etherealising' is anchored in reality – as with the appearance of the swan in chapter xix. This chapter (Rook's walk and vision of his son, the idyllic picnic with Lexie) 'is one of the finest things in all of Powys's fiction. The portrayal of super-sensitive perceptions in the book 'shares the same territory as Proust'.

In Rook Ashover Powys achieves his fullest portrait yet of the kind of man who is his unique contribution to fiction, the man who fails to achieve his fulfilment in normal human contacts and who seeks oblivion in the impersonal forces of nature. (33–41)

Richard Graves (*The Brothers Powys*, 1983) sees *Ducdame's* title as promising 'something magical, and a little sinister' after the more domestic themes of the abandoned *After My Fashion*. There is the metaphysical struggle between creative and destructive forces in the universe, or, as JCP had expressed it in *The Complex Vision*, the struggle between love and malice, 'the two sides of the eternal duality at the heart of everything', and of Rook's speculations on a Platonic universe 'composed of mind-stuff ... rarer and more beautiful than the visible world'. Meanwhile the Dorset landscape, strangely, 'becomes a living presence', responding to the influence of moonlight. (177–9)

Herbert Williams (JCP in 'Borderlines', 1997) sees the sense of family in *Ducdame* as dominant and menacing, in face of the melodrama and the puzzlingly passiveness of Rook. 'For all its weaknesses this is in many respects a powerful novel' – the influence of nature on the characters described with increased maturity, the death-obsession leading to such violent fates for his heroes now – with the advent of Phyllis in his life – exorcised, leading to wider possibilities.

Eileen Mable chose *Ducdame* as 'One Powys Book in my life' in *Newsletter* 47, enjoying the relationship between the brothers.

## *William Faulkner's Review of Ducdame*

To live means to vegetate. That is all that nature requires. All the fretting and stewing over this and that is man's own invention. And when people are put in a natural setting which in any way intrigues the eye, the importance of the characters becomes negligible: they are not convincing. Imagine a Punch and Judy show without a hooded stage.

Characters like Rook and his women, and Lexie and the women he did not have, should be put in play form — just the dialogue, to be read. But to write them in against a background of quiet, lovely English country defeats its own ends. Why is it that Americans don't seem to feel that part of the earth's surface in which their roots are? Joseph Hergesheimer\*, a decayed Pater, must go to Havana to write lovely prose; and when we try to describe our surroundings we do verbal calendars, lithographs on linoleum.

Material and aesthetic significance are not the same, but material importance can destroy artistic importance, in spite of what we would like to believe. Here is winter and the last rumor of Indian summer like a blonde, weary woman with reverted gaze done so well that Mrs. Ashover and her problem and Lexie with his imminent death become quite peppy, for suffering the compulsions of air and temperature and season as man does, everything is imminent, particularly death at this season, so both of them lose their significance. Where is the man who can die as grandly as December? Lexie should have died with December and so have lived, taking thereby an immortality, as Napoleon's old soldiers took an immortality from him. He was dead at Elba: and they were dead, regardless of the fact that they lingered in inns afterward.

But Lexie, living, does serve an end. . . .

There sounded from some neighboring tree invisible to them both the world-old Cuckoo! Cuckoo! of the unconquerable augur of sweet mischief.

Lexie's face relaxed. . . . 'It hasn't changed its tune yet!' he cried, 'the summer is only beginning!'

Hoarding his coppers of days, of hours and minutes. The only time that Lexie really lives as a character. And certainly he should live: the very passion for breath of a man shadowed by imminent and certain death, should live.

This neurotic age! People are still children. Sophistication is like the shape of a hat. Think of what, say Balzac or O. Henry, could have done with a man foredoomed to near and unavoidable death. He could have robbed trains, committed the indiscretions which one who is afraid that he will live to see ninety cannot and dare not. But Lexie does none of these things: he does not even grandly seduce anyone.

*If it do come to pass*

*That any man turn ass,*

*Leaving his wealth and ease*

*A stubborn will to please,*

*Ducdame, ducdame, ducdame: \*\*  
Here shall he see  
Gross fools as he,  
An if he will come to me.*

To gather fools into a circle: God has already done that. God and Balzac. Fools answer the same compulsions that we of the (so-called) intelligentsia do. And why gather fools into a circle? Unless you have something to sell them like Henry Ford.

Rook Ashover, Lexie his brother, Netta and Ann and Nell and the parson, seeing the new year in: Let the bird of loudest lay on the sole Arabian tree; death and division, and love and constancy are dead. Yet still the bitter days draw on, and Horace with one eye on Menelaus thinks Eheu! fugace!

"Susannah and the Elders!" murmured Lexie ... "but aren't they provocative and tantalizing? I wish we could hide ourselves in the weeds and see it making love to Leda."

There is Lexie. And here is Netta, descendants of barmaids with a passion for gentility. Abnegation. She gives over her lover for the lover's sake. Do women do this? Perhaps their amazing ability for using chance to serve their own ends causes them to do quite obscure things (obscure to men, that is). But to think of women giving up anything which can or may be of use! Perish the thought.

Katharsis: a loved shape purged of dross; a lingering scent or a single glove after the music itself has faded away. Grand to read, but not inevitable, in this day of money motives and keyhole excitements. And surely, women do not have to bother with this. Man invented chastity as he invented security — something for his particular temporary woman to wear.

So he says: "Chastity is important, as my fathers believed. They sentimentalized over chastity. But I do not believe this: I do not believe that anything is true: people are shadows of a shade, serving some obscure end. Therefore I sentimentalize over the fact that I am not sentimental."

People like the sexton, Pod — "if the holy Lord had meant us to sleep single He would never have put it into our brains to hammer up these here double beds" — and Mr. Twiney — certainly they would not make a book; but, being of the earth earthy, they make the Rooks and Anns seem more futile than ever.

These people are not dramatic material. What we want in our reading is people who do the things we cannot or dare not do, or people that motivate stories in us. Or people in whom the compulsions of climate reveal themselves only when the action itself is completed.

Gathering people into a circle is like removing your overcoat at a Child's restaurant — you do it at your own risk. For sometimes you get a novel, and sometimes you don't. From a successful novel you get a sense of completeness, of form: that is, the people in it do the things which you would do if you were, one by one, these people. We are all fools, probably; and most of us know it: but it is unbearable to believe that the things we do are not significant. And the things these people do are not

significant, for they do things which we do not like to believe we would do.

... *Here shall he see*

*Gross fools as he*

*If only he come with me.*

To be gross fools: being a gross fool is as hard as being a saint. Being a gross anything is rather grand — bootlegger or politician or courtesan. One who can sincerely lie, or squeeze every potato before buying it; to be sincerely unpleasant to live with — this is something. But these people are not sincerely fools, none of them are. In the sense of having their actions change the trend of somebody's life. They dub along\*\*\* without significance. But perhaps this was what Mr. Powys wanted. But surely they do not do those things that we as individuals would like to do to preserve that world of fine fabling in which we live.

[KK notes]

**William Faulkner** (1897–1962), 'Southern Gothic' author of many stories and novels (*The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*), typically set in his native Mississippi. By 1925 he had published two volumes of poems and three of stories; his first novel was *Soldiers Pay* (1926).

Faulkner's review of 'Ducdame' was originally published in the New Orleans Times-Picayune, March 22, 1925, page 6, appearing over the initials "W. F." in John McClure's Sunday book page, 'Literature—and Less.' © 1925 The Times-Picayune, L.L.C. All rights reserved. Used with permission of The Times Picayune.

Reprinted, in *Mississippi Quarterly*, 28:3 (1975: Summer), 34, with an article ('A Fourth Book Review by Faulkner') by Carvel Collins. Reprinted with permission, with thanks.

\* **Joseph Hergesheimer** (1880–1954), author whose ornate 'aesthetic' style was influential in the 1920s (to be replaced by 'realism' in the 1930s). His *Java Head* (1919) was admired by Samuel Beckett.

\*\* 'Ducdame' – see page 19.

\*\*\* **Dub** – see page 13.





## Powyses & The Dial

*The Dial* began life in 1840 with the 'Transcendelists' group (Emerson and others), then from 1880 as a political magazine based in Chicago, then from 1920–29 in New York as a review of Modernist literature and art. It still looks an excellent magazine, with almost all the names listed as contributors still known and read today.

Alyse Gregory was closely connected with *The Dial* and editor for two years from 1923. The Powyses were associated with it through the 1920s, contributing reviews and some longer essays (16 from Llewelyn, six from JCP). Theodore makes one appearance, in February 1925, with his sad story of innocent misunderstandings, 'The Painted Wagon' (this came out simultaneously in England, in *The Nation*, also in *Best Short Stories of 1925*, and was in TFP's first collection, *The House with an Echo*, in 1928). Philippa Powys also made one appearance, in August 1928, with her prose-poem 'Phoenix'.

Two typical Powys contributions follow.

### *John Cowper Powys: The Swan-song of Raminagrobis* The Dial, December 1926

Under the Rose by *Anatole France*\*. Arranged and annotated by Michel Corday. Translated from the French by J. Lewis May. 8vo. 223 pages. Dodd, Mead and Company. \$2.50.

When Panurge and Friar John, in Rabelais' book, betake themselves to the chamber of the old great poet Raminagrobis, they find "the jolly old man, albeit in the agony of his departure from this world, looking cheerfully, with an open countenance, splendid aspect, and behaviour full of alacrity." But the valedictory oracle of this stalwart unbeliever, who had driven all ministers of religion from his bedside, proved meagre and unsatisfactory:

Before you eat, begin to fast;  
For what shall be was never past.  
Say, unsay, gainsay, save your breath;  
Take, or not take her.

In the same way, to confess the plain truth, it is impossible to read this last book of the great exposé of human ideals without a sigh of disappointment.

Any reader who turns to Michel Corday's posthumous fragments of Anatole France fresh from Brousson's shameless garrulousness about him, must feel, I should think, very much as one could imagine some initiated neighbour of the Reverend Laurence Sterne to have felt, when with his head stuffed full of the mellow tittle-tattle of Parson Yorick's table-talk he was compelled to listen to an obituary discourse upon the dead man, preached, with extracts from *his sermons*, by some well-meaning curate who had never known him as he was, except in parish-room and

vestry! What one comes to feel, in pondering upon these forlorn speculations as we encounter them here undiluted by the writer's more mellow art, is that when thus presented to the mind as a final "Credo" they hit us with the harsh dogmatism of an entrenched attitude that is far too obstinately banked-up to respond adequately to the wavering outlines of real life. The temper of these fragments is strictly speaking anything but sceptical. It is fanatical in its dogmatic hopelessness. Scepticism is a different thing altogether. Scepticism is pre-eminently something that keeps the doors and windows of the mind open; open to all manner of chances, possibilities, upshots, ambiguous results, unexpected developments. Scepticism allows for the "afterthoughts" of the nameless multitudes. It recognizes that the dreams of man are also the dreams of nature. It keeps a "weather-ear", so to speak, alert for all sorts of rumours, intimations, omens, voices, whispers, silences. The Dialogues in *Under the Rose* convert into a massive indubitable certitude what is in reality no more than a vague sigh fluctuating down all the centuries:

Until the extinction of this miserable planet, life will go on issuing from death . . . then . . . the sun will go out, the earth will go rolling on in space, until the final cataclysm which shall destroy it.

The cosmic disillusionment thus petrified into an unquestionable assumption reduces itself to a view of life that is so simple, so forthright, as to partake of the nature of a truism. It is in fact the old melancholy speculative "truism," from the plain ground of which, all the way down the ages, every human subtlety, every human hope, every human desperation, has lifted itself — lifted itself on wings broken, bruised, thwarted, baffled, frustrated; but still lifted itself!

As one ponders over these dialogues one becomes more and more aware of one solace at any rate in our forlorn condition which gets scant attention here. I refer to the inspiration that man is able to receive from the magical silences of nature. "What of you who are said to be so happy?" asks the interlocutor in the *Dialogue on Old Age*; and the answer is significant if only as showing the limitations of this ironical hedonism in the mere matter of natural happiness:

Leaving out of account the couch of mortal woman

— we are indebted for the word "couch" to the translator —

and the table at which one sits in company with a few choice friends, my greatest pleasure in life has been to say over to myself certain lines of Racine. And even so I had some sapless days during which I felt no love in my heart for a poetry of which I recognized the artifice.

May it not be that Anatole France's Garden of Epicurus, for all his notes for a *Dialogue upon Astronomy*, lacked a certain subtle contact with the silences of nature whereby the great sceptical writers like Shakespeare and Montaigne preserved their balance, kept themselves *in utrumque paratus*? Amorous dalliance, varied by the good

cook-shops and the good wits of Paris, and even by the artifices of Racine, leaves many resources of the human spirit unexplored. If Anatole France was a wise man — and it seems a paradox to deny it, so deep is the hypnotic power of his irony — he was a wise man who prided himself on foregoing what Dante calls “the good of Intellect.” He accepts the material world at its surface value; and like Hephaestus in the chamber of Ares and Aphrodite he binds down to “the rack of this tough world” with the golden net of his consummate wit all those thoughts of mortal brains which would “wander through eternity.”

Even the tendencies of modern science seem to point to a system of things far more complicated and mysterious than this solid obvious material world of the great ironist’s assumption. His immense classical erudition, combined with his astonishing learning in matters of ecclesiastical folk-lore gave to his quips and his jibes an aplomb, a rich old-wine flavour, which the bleakness of their actual philosophical content would not otherwise have evoked. And thus we are put upon the track of a very curious secret of the great man’s work-shop.

The observations presented to us here do not, in spite of all Monsieur Corday’s sympathetic annotations, leave upon the mind any very arresting or very original impression. Why is this? Is it not due to the fact that the famous irony evaporates like thin smoke, with the suppression of the imaginary company of *dramatis personae* through whose beguiling idiosyncrasies it would have found expression? These fragments represent the intellectual ideas of a great original artist who was not a great original thinker. Apart from the rich life-giving urge of his creative genius his ideas show themselves constricted and thin. They ring true; but they ring like coins that have lost their superscription. And this reveals to us the startling fact that in the selection of these ideas he was driven forward not only by a love of truth but by the unconscious cunning of the artist.

Temperamentally lacking in all mysticism, the artist’s instinct in him drove him inevitably forward towards that particular vision of the world which lends itself best to a humorous awareness of the gulf between the Real and the Ideal in human affairs. The old eternal doubt as to whether man can lift himself above his five illusion-creating senses; that old dogmatic acceptance of the visible world as the only world — with “*muttum*, the noise a pig makes,” as the limit of its interpretation — became the solid marble pedestal upon which his art was reared. What we are presented with in these dialogues is the pedestal without the art; and lo! the marble has become brick.

But the secret of Anatole France’s work-shop so curiously betrayed by *Under the Rose* is not limited to the discovery of how old and time-worn his basic ideas are. Another loss of power is revealed here with the evaporation of the majestic irony. What has endeared this great writer to so many people are those up-wellings of deep human tenderness, which, like fresh fountains in a salt sea, redeem the very element he works in. Like Malvolio he “thinks nobly of the soul” even while he reduces it to the desires of Mitzi, the brown-eyed dog. No French writer since Rabelais himself throws such largesse of royal unction round the smallest human gesture of his

fictional characters. This high quality also vanishes from these dialogues with the vanishing of such persons as “The Baron Onarion de Ténar and Madame Paillet, commonly called Rodogune.”

And so it comes to pass that when, like poor Panurge, we visit the chamber of the dying Raminagrobis, and listen to the vaticinations of the old great man in their bald nakedness we are conscious of something meagre and disappointing . . .

Take, or not take her;

Off, or on;

Handy-dandy is your lot.

**John Cowper Powys**

*\* Anatole France (1844–1924), poet, journalist, novelist, satirist, Nobel prizewinner 1921, widely admired for his ironic wit and elegant prose. He embodied fin de siècle scepticism, defended Dreyfus, was banned by the Vatican.*

**JCP on Anatole France:** The essay in *Suspended Judgments* (1916) calls him ‘probably the most disillusioned human intelligence which has ever appeared on the surface of this planet’, and contrasts Nietzsche’s life-affirming scepticism with France’s tolerant urbanity, in his happy kingdom of polished disillusion: ‘He is too deep a sceptic even to remain at the point of taking seriously his own aesthetic epicureanism’. Unlike Wilde, Pater, Stendhal, Montaigne, ‘who laugh at humanity but do not laugh at themselves ... Anatole France has no gravity. He respects nothing; least of all himself. That is why there is something singularly winning about him ...’ Like Voltaire, ‘he has too humorous a soul to endure the solemnity of the cultivated senses’. Sex, to him, is ‘the most amusing and irresistible jest ... It gives him an ironic satisfaction to show how the most heroic and ideal thoughts are affected by the little wanton tricks of circumstances and character ... Anatole France is one of those great men of genius to whom the gods have permitted an unblurred vision of the eternal normalities of human weakness. This vision he can never forget.’

‘In the manner of the great classical writers ... he holds himself back from any emotional betrayal of his own feelings. He is the type of character most entirely opposite to what might be called the Rousseau-type ... with its enthusiastic neurotic mania for self-revelation ... His point of view is always objective. It might be maintained... that his very temperament is objective... One feels as though Nature were kept decisively and formally in her place ...’

However:

‘His style is so beautiful and characteristic that one cannot read the simplest passage of easy narration from his pen without becoming penetrated with his spirit, without feeling saner, wiser, kindlier, and more disenchanted and more humane.’ ‘He alone of all modern writers, creates that leisurely atmosphere of noble and humorous dignity... according to which every gesture and word of the most simple human being comes to be endowed with a kind of royal distinction ... Anatole France, the most disillusioned and sceptical of writers, is also the writer whose books throw over the fancies and caprices of humanity the most large and liberal benediction.’

‘I suppose that no author who has ever lived is so irritating to strong-minded idealists ... A certain kind of pity is certainly a profound element in his mocking heart. But it is the pity of an Olympian god, a pity that cares little for what we call justice, a pity that refuses to take seriously the objects of his commiseration ... The glacial smile of the yawning gulf of eternal futility flickers through all his pages.’

*Llewelyn Powys: Milk of Dandelion*

The Dial, *January 1925*

The Harp-Weaver and other poems. *By Edna St Vincent Millay.* \*

*12mo. 94 pages. Harper and Brothers. \$2.*

The poetry of Edna St Vincent Millay is distinguished from most modern verse in that it is content to carry forward, under the colour of her particular idiosyncratic emphasis, the ancient lyric tradition. She is in search of no new thing, but so spontaneous and natural are her reactions that she is able to evoke with unfaltering sureness that high beauty which has existed and will always exist beneath the bleak manifestations of the most commonplace day.

At a time when so much verse is merely the product of the intellect — a matter of unexpected verbal manipulation, of startling cacophony — it is indeed refreshing to come upon poetry which at its best is dependent upon something else than brain. In a dozen delicate lilt this young girl has managed to achieve with a graceful inevitability just what her rivals are for ever straining after. Words with her seem to lose their dragging stubbornness, and become swift handmaidens whose happy task it is to carry to the reader, fresh as beaded dew on a white mushroom, this or that suppliancy of delicate song.

And yet for all her simplicity, the cast of Edna St Vincent Millay's mind is curiously disillusioned. It has been sprinkled, one suspects, with no lustral water, but rather with the bitter milk of the common dandelion:

Not only under ground are the brains of men  
Eaten by maggots.  
Life in itself  
Is nothing,  
An empty cup, a flight of uncarpeted stairs.

It is apparent that she is quite unable to rid her mind of its preoccupation with death; and it is, perhaps, one's consciousness of this fact that lends such a note of sweet lingering melancholy to her poetical response to our ephemeral planet-existence. Indeed, in spite of her childish gallantry, her childish gaiety, her childish mischief, one is ever aware of the souging of rain-wet winds against the white window panes of the world. Her rarest poems have in them a note of dim nostalgia

such as one might imagine troubling the wild unsettled mind of a goose-girl who recollects in dreary exile certain fond experiences of her barefoot life on the grass-tufted, gorse-grown village common of her birth.

It is of course this conviction of hers as to the inherent vanity of our days — each one of them nicked for the market of oblivion like so many plumaged birds — which has made her so provocative a leader for the youth of our time; for that youth which since the war has turned so consistently, so wilfully, towards the insidious ancient wisdom which teaches, in a world where all is uncertain, to snatch at pleasure when and where it may be had. And there is, it must be acknowledged, something very engaging, very satisfactory, in the girlish effrontery with which she challenges the accepted standards of the *bourgeoisie*. For all Mr Padraic Colum's reasonable objection to the idea of a candle burning at both ends, her well-known quatrain has its own symbolic value. And how welcome is the candour of that proud and beautiful sonnet which begins

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and when  
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain  
Under my head till morning!

'The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems' contains much besides this sonnet which is characteristic of Miss Millay's work. Once more she shows herself exquisitely sensitive to the sights and sounds and smells of the country; to the colour of prim asters or heavy-headed globular cottage dahlias; to the sound of the wind in ash trees, reminiscent of the reiterated breaking of seaside waves on a certain distant beach; to the scent of drenched hedgerow weeds in the twilight of a rainy day.

Nor linger in the rain to mark  
The smell of tansy through the dark.

She can most wonderfully, most innocently, bring before us the very spirit of each receding season. Which of us does not know the peculiar desolation falling upon the landscape of the eastern states of America during the long months of midwinter? Could this forlornness be better conveyed than by the suggestion of the look of snow lodged upon the hairy dead leaves of nettles? In the same way, four unassuming lines from her pen suffice to put us in the mood to appreciate the long drawn out days of the Indian summer during which the indolent, colonial fruit harvest so slowly progresses.

Now the autumn shudders  
In the rose's root.  
Far and wide the ladders  
Lean among the fruit.

The fact is these snatches of song have about them the suggestive grace of a hundred world-old human associations. They themselves are like wisps of faintly

green midsummer hay, like drifting feathery down from the plant which village people call "old man's beard," like handfuls of driven snow at the time of the feast of St Stephen!

Though her sonnets are undoubtedly distinguished, it may well be that her personality finds its happiest expression in these slighter fragments. Any one who attempts to write sonnets must be prepared to enter the lists where only the mightiest have won fame. Yet even so, the fine rapier of this young girl is not to be despised though 'tis raised aloft in a field where only veterans in armour hold their swords to the sky! How certain lines from these sonnets linger in the mind long after they have been read!

That Love at length should find me out and bring  
This fierce and trivial brow unto the dust.

Wherefore I say: O Love, as summer goes,  
I must be gone, steal forth with silent drums,  
That you may hail anew the bird and rose  
When I come back to you, as summer comes.

That April should be shattered by a gust,  
That August should be levelled by a rain,  
I can endure, and that the lifted dust  
Of man should settle to the earth again;  
But that a dream can die, will be a thrust  
Between my ribs forever of hot pain.

I see in Edna St Vincent Millay's poetry one serious weakness; and this is a certain tendency to allow her childish Narcissism to lapse into the particular note of self-conscious sentimental artifice such as is especially dear to the magazine-reading public. Unfortunately there are traces of this in each of her precious volumes. It is as though upon occasions she was not unwilling to risk her birthright of immortality for the gratification of immediate applause. For many readers her charming Prayer to Persephone in Second April is completely marred by its trifling and saccharine ending:

Say to her, my dear, my dear,  
It is not so dreadful here.

In the present volume a flagrant example of what I am trying to indicate is to be found in the poem entitled 'A Visit to the Asylum', in which the effect of a highly suggestive conception is again spoilt by the last verse. It is amazing how anybody who could write of Bedlam with the following artful restraint

And out of all the windows  
No matter where we went

The merriest eyes would follow me  
And make me compliment

should be content to conclude the same poem with lines as “cute” and “sympathy-rousing” as

‘Come again, little girl!’ they called and I  
Called back, ‘You come see me!’

But let us forget the Edna St Vincent Millay of Vassar College, of Greenwich Village, of Vanity Fair, and return once more to the true poet whose rash, reticent, and haughty spirit, is, one feels, ultimately incapable of being cheapened at the hands of the world. In the most beautiful of all her poems, she commits her work to the care of posterity. If there yet remains anybody in America who is in doubt as to its high merit, let him turn to the ‘Poet and His Book’.

Boys and girls that lie  
Whispering in the hedges  
Do not let me die,  
Mix me with your pledges  
Boys and girls that slowly walk  
In the woods, and weep, and quarrel,  
Staring past the pink wild laurel  
Mix me with your talk ...

Boys and girls that steal  
From the shocking laughter  
Of the old, to kneel  
By a dripping rafter  
Under the discoloured eaves ...

Bear me to the light.  
Flat upon your bellies  
By the webby window lie,  
Where the little flies are crawling,  
Read me, margin me with scrawling, —  
Do not let me die!

**Llewelyn Powys**

\* *Edna St Vincent Millay (1892–1950) won the Pulitzer Prize for her poetry in 1923. LLP met her when he came to America in 1920. The Verdict of Bridlegoose, his impressions of America (1926) is dedicated to her: ‘a leprechaun among poets’. In 1923 EM married Eugene Boissevain and moved to Steepletop, in Austerlitz (the next county to Hillsdale), ‘I had a wonderful time at Edna’s’, Llewelyn wrote from New York in April 1928, to Arthur Ficke at Hillsdale: ‘I liked Eugen very much. and I was entranced by Edna. She is without equal’. Llewelyn and Alyse stayed in a cottage opposite Steepletop in 1930–31; Alyse’s diary describes their not always very happy time there (Llewelyn was pining for Gamel Woolsey). Impassioned Clay (1931) is dedicated to Eugene. After their*



*return to Dorset Llewelyn wrote, again to Ficke, 'It makes me sad that our Edna is sad. Oh! if I could I would hide her in a wren's thickest nest and only allow her to look at the wan moon five times a year.'*  
*Edna had been to Dorset in 1921, and she and Eugene visited Chydyok in April 1934. 'This beautiful and famous poet had always entranced Llewelyn's imagination', Alyse wrote in her introduction to Llewelyn's Letters (1943), followed by a glowing eulogy of the glamorous Eugene. The Boissevains planned a visit to Switzerland; this did not take place but the two couples continued to exchange letters.*

*A 1931 letter from JCP letter to Edna follows. From the Powys Society Collection. A number of ??? and !!! annotated in the margins.*

Route 2  
Hillsdale NewYork Dec 29 1931

Dear Edna

I see & note that you do keep your promises! It was sweet of you to send me this English edition of "Fatal Interview". I like it better than the American one & am proud to have this particular copy,

From what we gather from their letters Lulu is a good deal happier in his mind — but by no means cured, & he seems to have, for the time ... the cause no doubt this fatal sorcery ... though he puts it down himself to bad sales of his last book ... given up all writing ... but is enjoying himself fixing up paths walls bastions barbicans of their new abode (far cheaper than the White Nose) next door to, & indeed under the same roof as, our eldest sister Gertrude. There appears to be no limit to the pleasure with which he is now occupying himself in making a sort of private fortress for his lonelier hours out of a great neolithic tumulus there is just above where he lives now. But I don't like his having this cessation in writing — even if he is amusing himself — & I don't like his not being quite cured.

But Alyse I am thankful to say seems much happier wh. means, clearly enough, that Lulu is better: I am thinking at the moment more of his heart than his lungs ... but as far as that goes he really seems pretty well. Thank you again ever so much, Edna dear, for the book. Phyllis joins me in love to you & in love to Eugene, Coeur d'Aigle, & we both pray you'll have a lucky 1932 yrs aff.tly John

## *John and Theodore in 1925*

4 Patchin Place  
Sunday Jan 17

Theodore my dear

I do hope all is well with you — I haven't written to you since I sent that last Review. I am longing to read Mr Tasker in print & see how it affects me. I recall that terrible scene of the pigs & the horse well enough! Well, poor old Brother Positive sailed away on the Mauretania fairly well pleased with his visit I hope — but who can read the secret thoughts of that transmitted C. F. P. skull? I wish Lulu were better. I cannot say I am happy about him. Sometimes I feel as if he & Alyse wd. be wise to risk money difficulties & go off to Arizona or New Mexico — and then again I dread any move for him. He certainly dreads any move for himself.

If he and Alyse could visit Willie for a year? Africa cured him; as nothing else has done ... but he wd. certainly dread that long journey in his present mood.

Theodore my dear what is this I hear rumours of of Dickie having been ill? I don't like to think of that. I haven't seen any letter yet about it ... but Marian said that Gertrude or someone had said he had had quite a dangerous illness — How awful for you & poor Violet if that is so! aye! I do hope & pray that he is all right by this time ... he must be all right — as it is so long ago & no news must be good news at this terrible distance.

My novel — Sexton & all! — will really be out I think on Feb 13 — I shall hasten to send you a copy but I fear I shall never get any opinion ... one way or the other ... out of you. You & Bernie — the ones whose opinions on these matters one wd. value so, are always the ones who get out of it without committing yourselves to a word!

I hope Katie will be all right and enjoy herself in London.

Alyse dreads to leave Lulu alone out there in the hills & yet she cannot very well avoid coming in to her office at least once a month. But she does not know how she'll bring herself to leave him this next time unless he's better & it's hard to find anyone to go to take care of him — when she's away.

The weather has not been so cold lately — not nearly so cold. I have no great number of lectures yet but enough to enable me to send home something to Burpham every week and things may improve. I do certainly think that it is no boastful affectation when I say I am a good deal more afraid of life than of death. But there it is. We get what we get, not what we deserve. Love to V your J.

East Chaldon  
Dorchester  
Dorset

January 30, 1925

For four mornings the postman has gone by, making his motor bicycle rattle for

pleasure because he has nothing for us. But this morning we had the New leader and your letter. The new leader hasn't printed a story of mine for 3 months now, and I dare say they are giving up fiction. Also I do not write stories as well as I used so my fiction books like coming to an end too. "The Market Bell" was an utter failure, "No amount of tinkering" my critics say "can do any good, it is dead and should be (mourned) for as dead. It took a year but as I find it so hard to get a market for my short stories I don't care much if it took 20 years. Beside Mr. Tasker and "Innocent Birds" that are to come out this year I hope I have an other that is not damned. It's three short novels of about 50,000 words called "Mockery Gap" that. you looked at when you were here. I hope that will be published next year but I don't know. And they may leave a Volume of other short stories that will be for 1926. That should be Francis' last year at school, And when that is over I don't care if I can't do anything more. But one is sure to feel a little troubled at first when ones house declines. When thats over, why one can live on as usual. I don't like death as much as you. Lulu will be better. I am sure of it under his wife's care. And why not go to Africa. And then England. You are quite right. Get him south, and then to Kenya. He suffers now from his struggle in New York to make a living. That woman at Montacute who I think Lulu used to know who sleeps in a shelter is alive still and has had a child!

Dicky had Typhus, bit it must have been a rather mild attack for he is quite recovered. But we are very anxious when we think of the dangers of that awful country. May God protect him and keep him from all harm.

I look forward exceedingly to "Ducdame". You are right. I never know what is good or bad, but I know what I like.

"Mr. Tasker" comes out about the same time as yours. No one has died here lately. Mrs. Boyle has had a baby. I haven't caught a mouse in the back kitchen for two days. Peter is getting old and has a strong smell now. He sleeps over the stairs.

Violet sends you her love and a kiss. When you write to Lulu ask him to write to me.

Much love dear

Yours ever Theodore

March 9th, 1925.

My dear

I have safely received "Ducdame" the book arrived this morning. I an sure that I shall enjoy it very much. Now that my novel that had a river is dead ere born I must rejoice in yours whose river flows both at the beginning and the end. I have just opened the book but haven't encountered the sexton. He can't be Corporal Death but I will look out for him. I hope all is well. These reviewers are back biters sometimes. But I hope they will be kind to you. Those gentlemen and ladies upon the cover look a little ghostly I think. Is the sexton one of them? My dear I want to hear from you. Did you receive "Mr. Tasker", I sent it to Patchin Place. Tell me how you are and what you think of. We have the black frost now that Dick Ashover was pleased

with. And the lanes are dry. Violet is quite well and happy. She has bought a new stair carpet. She is going to walk to Chydeok tomorrow with Mrs. Tod. Louis comes for a night of the 10th he lectures at Weymouth and Dorchester. They say he's eloquent there. I would rather have a little letter from you than no letter at all. Do you have that giddiness now? Do you wear these vests? Have you leisure, do you write. Have [you] begun the book about Religion — that will be your masterpiece. I am sure of it.

Yours

Theodore

I look forward to reading your book. The sun is lovely, but the wind is bitter. Are you coming home this summer? Peter sends you his love.

Much love

from

Violet

XXXXX

East Chaldon  
March 21st, 1925.

My dear

I loved your letter, and all that you say I drink up — however much my head hangs down ever the table — with a pleasant joy. You may be sure I would think as you do if I could. But you should have seen some of the things that have been said about “Mr. Tasker” over here though this book has been noticed more than the others I think. I wish you may be right and why shouldnt I believe you. I say again that you may be right. Your truth may be the truth. I love you, you give me much joy, I listen you may be sure to your words. I want to see a review of Ducdarne. I like your Nell. I want to see what is said. There is sadness in your novel, a longing for home. I hope you will stay here all next summer. I know from how you write in Ducdame that you do long like a Woman. I wish you were coming this summer. There is a [rumour?] of Lulu being here soon. I wish you were coming so soon. But as you say of course time passes. I hope Lulu is really better, I wonder if he will come. Certainly he could live at the White Nore and be very well. He will find everything exactly the same though I do not dig up my garden now. Violet sends you a kiss. I can't run after girls either. I don't worry over them these days for our days are passing.

Yours,

Theodore

let me have a review about Ducdame and if you chance upon one about “Mr. Tasker” I wouldn't mind that too.

Good bye

my

dear

xx

xxx

East Chaldon  
April 10th, 1925

My dear,

I think you are right about Mr. Tasker being the best of these books, Frances thinks so to[o]. This book has sold 750 copies so far in this country and the colonies, which is very good for the kind of thing that I do. Your letter pleased me very much. I daresay I shall get through this year and next year with Francis at school. Dicky seems to manage wonderfully in Africa. But I don't know what Francis will do after that. But if we can get him through school without being impoverished we shall be very lucky. I think I ought to manage this now. For though the Marker Bull [Market Bell] is set aside, Chatto & Windus will most likely publish "Mockery Gap" this autumn perhaps. And "Innocent Birds" next spring and a lot of short stories later next year. So that should get us to next Christmas year when Francis will be almost 18 and could leave school. I daresay then I might get a little a few pounds a year to add to my income, so that I can give Violet a shilling or two without being bothered when she wants it. I hope that will be the case I don't want to go back, to the unpleasant state of Poverty again.

Lulu sent Violet a little book of essays that are very good indeed. He is very happy they say about coming, I hope when he is here he will bear with my queer ways and not get angry with me. I was delighted with the review of "Ducdame". I think it is quite an intelligent one, and certainly sees what you were after. "Ducdame" should meet with good success I do hope that it will. How is your health. I still suffer rather from indigestion though I am very careful what I eat. If you see Lulu tell him that a worthy fellow Colonel Lawrance who ruled the Arabs in the war and now is a Private soldier at Bovington Camp is very anxious to meet him. Violet and I like him he is very mild and modest and has fallen half a dozen times from the [sky] — he was once in the Airforce. We have only seen him twice though. Another man a very rich coal merchant wants to see Lulu. Only this coal merchant breathes into your face rather when he praises Keats. Tell Lulu not to be down on us, we have only had from Greenhill Terrace what has been given to us. And no more than anyone else. I hope Lulu won't be angry with me. Very likely I shall publish nothing more after next year, I fear that I take these things too seriously. I am glad Lulu is coming. I fear Katie is not always as well as she should be. Lulu will calm her I expect. But Gertrude says she is quite well.

Good bye

Yours ever

Theodore

East Chaldon  
July 2nd 1925

My dear

I have received your two letters and the reviews. It is delightful to be with you upon

the same page when the reviewer has really taken the trouble to read as well as to review us. He writes as an honest man should and I am extremely pleased by what he writes. Ducdame has been a success however modest you like to be and however much you have had taken away because of the Map. A Map I proposed to have at the beginning of "Mockery Gap" is not to be. I am only going to have a plain cover. Since the Left Leg these books have gone steadily down hill in America but Knopf still perseveres though his terms are altered a little, he is to have 1000 [sheets] of Mockery Gap. I hope this one will go better. I have been a little anxious about Llewelyn's rheumatism which has rather troubled him — though he seems in excellent spirits otherwise, and he has always a merry word to say when we meet. It is a splendid thing to see him happy. Alyse is very careful about him that's as it ought to be. I suppose you will never get this letter as you are going so far away. Violet sends you a great many kisses — a very great number. What does happen to your letters when they reach "Patchin Place". Will your young lady be there to forward this. I hope so for I do want to tell you that your letters give me wonderful pleasure and I hate that you should have to add one jot or tit[t]le to your awful labours. Gertrude is very happy about her picture being hung by the [London?] Group. Doris has had chicken pox.

Heaven bless you and send me plenty of your letters. The two books yours I mean Gertrude says will be the event of the Autumn for us — most true she is.

Aug 28  
Patchin Place

Theodore my dear

I am posting this day the Century with that article on our Brothers at last out! Aye my dear but I hope it'll please you! Do write & let me know — whether or not! I think as far as my self-criticism was concerned I hurried it off too fast and with a sort of — I don't know — mock-humility perhaps; but not exactly that either; for I am most genuinely cold & dissatisfied towards my past work & it is undoubtedly much less instinctive — that's not the word either — much less integrated and all-of-a-piece than either yours or Lulu's. "Alarms & excursions", really, you might say, here & there, occasional debouchings & experimental explorations — rather than the expression of my definite compact massive point of view.

However! I cheer myself — to myself — by thinking that what I'm now writing this new novel about Yeovil & Sherborne & Bradford Abbas will be more gathered together and more free from what Lulu calls bricks than my other works — more written thro' my skull instead of thro' my hat!

We shall see. I await with great longing your new autumn book. I wish it wd. come quickly. It'll be one of those new ones that will be practically first reading to me.

I hope Violet is pretty well & that you are both getting through the Summer Holiday-Time all right — I expect when I see Francis again he'll look a lot older. It'll be wonderful seeing you actually in the Spring. In April or May for certain — I suppose after for certain I ought to write D.V. but what superstition!

Do you recall how I used to send you such a lot of new novels — I never buy a new novel these days — though sometimes I get them from a Library. What a terrible person this Michael Arlen must be! I like these Irish writers. I adore the writings so direct and poetical & natural & exciting of your friend O'Flaherty and I like the fancies and quips of your admirer James Stephens.

How much more poetical, and how much more exciting and pleasant and full of sweet-bitter sap these Irish writers are than a sod like Michael Arlen. I see there is a new book by that smart bugger who was in the School House and hated John Carey or if he didn't hate him made a fool of him in that book about Sherborne. I shall not read it.

How they do praise Mr Osbert Sitwell in the advertisements over here, saying that the Sitwell family go back to Domesday & are descended from two lines of Kings — I shall not read a word.

But I shall read, & I fancy shall enjoy, Mrs Dalloway by Virginia Wolf [*sic*] — I heard Gilbert Cannan once lecture on Virginia Wolf & he said she was the greatest authority on all literature & had the greatest influence of all persons in London.

But I tell you my dear friend I am waiting most anxiously for another volume of yours. That passage about Mrs Fancy & her furniture did make me laugh aloud a thing I hardly ever do. I hardly ever laugh. Lulu never laughs — but it is a lovely sensation. I hope you can laugh still my dear & can get occasions for so doing. At what did you really laugh aloud last at?

Well give my love & many kisses to dear little Violet & the gods be with you both & protect you from all ill —

yr J.

September 9th, 1925

My dear

I was a little low yesterday when I wrote to you but I am better today. Any little worry a chance of a worry puts me out. I know I feel and say horrid things sometimes. I am a little curious and funny at times. I often feel angry and queer. Forgive me and take no notice of my last letter. Violet is pretty well and Francis is very happy because Gill is staying at Chydeock and he gets on very well with her. Angus [*Davidson*] is there too, and I hope he didn't think me a fell strange nobody. He has given me Mrs. Dalloway and that's kind of him. I don't see Lulu at all often. I find the walk to White Nose rather tiring. I daresay I visited too much and we have just been put in our proper place — don't mention this to Angus. Gertrude says "We will all go if we worry you" — But of course that's not the way to talk. For no one can be worried who really loves them ..... Katie is the same, she is kind though Violet is sometimes a little cross with her. But to me she is just the same. Good bye my dearest. I pray God that your affairs will be easier now. I think they will, I hope they will.

Yours ever

Theodore

Sept 25th

Theodore me dear I was so glad to get both your letters — the sad one & the other more cheerful one. If you could have heard Phyllis saying “I wish there was no end to Theodore’s books!”

Of course writing words down is more of a trade with your brothers — but what oh too self-lacerating one! does that imply?

Too well, too well, do I know — it implies that with you it is pre original genius — the thing itself — unalloyed by the thrice-accursed power of cleverness from wh. I suffer & of cautious criticism from which Lulu (between his dykes and his dams) surveys the flowing tide. You are the one son of Mary & C.F.P. that if you were alone in the world would have the power of leaving behind a mound a tumulus a hill of Roddites\* from which those to come could look at the wayward sea. A trade? Of course it isn’t a trade with you. The Lord alone knows what it is — but it’s an extraordinary form of what has always been called genius — which is the one word that every one of us in our hearts craves most to have applied to us! And you are established in that unapproachably ... beyond all attacks.

I am now almost inclined to think that this is my favourite of all your books — though I confess I don’t like Mr Moggs’ “bells” ! But except for the killing of the kittens there is really no violence in this book ... & with the power of this mysterious Fisherman a kind of Apollo in Arcadia ... “good”, for the first time in the works of T.F.P. is permitted — but only for a while I see, in the last melancholy sentence, as far as the old women are concerned! — to conquer “evil” .

The Caddy is excellent. I like him far the best — aye! but there are a hundred of your most characteristic touches. I read half of it aloud & then finished the rest to myself because I wanted to catch this mail. I certainly do derive great satisfaction from your writings. I cannot get the dialect like you [ ] by the just Gods when Mr Pring talks to the Stones. In fact I continue to wish that the change produced by the fisherman had been a little more slowly worked out — the last part of the book suggests that you were rather hurried as you wrote it but the last sentence although a sardonic one is very good. I think the weakest passage is the one describing the overturn of the Roddy boat and the most powerful the chapter entitled “Don’t Stray”. It will indeed be interesting to see what your Irish admirers who like you to deal in physical violence think of this gentler work. They will at least have the Prings and Pottles quarrelling to enjoy. I think Mr Gulliver & his Map is first rate & I like also very much particularly the way you brought in the ancient mariner. The monkey was a little Voltarian but I suspect founded on reality. It’s odd how the one touches [*sic*] of reality in a book are always the ones that seem most fantastic. I cannot remember anything of innocent birds — so when I read that it will be new. Sometimes I fancied I recognized characteristics of myself in Mr James Tarr; but I know who the original of Mr Roddy is. Have I not been taken to that house near Weymouth.



I rather desire to read more & more of your books as I have got the taste for a queer sort of drink here — like Vodka or Potteen — that I buy from an Italian Tailor whom I call the Tailor of Gloucester. Give a kiss, as ever, to Violet; & don't forget to tell me what your son Francis thinks of doing.

Good luck! J

East Chaldon  
September 29th, 1923

My dear

I am so happy that you are pleased with Mockery Gap. It gives me the greatest pleasure to know that you enjoy it, and to read it aloud too — that's a thing to do. I will answer your Questions about Francis. He will leave school in a year's time that is to say he will leave after the autumn term next year. He has passed one certificate examination though without honours. That might get him some kind of work. I thought he might become an exciseman like Robert Burns. But it's hard to get in to that I should think. It's a public examination and no-one seems to know anything about it at all. I don't know what he will do. He may beat [ ] during part of 1927. Perhaps a degree might teach him something — but I don't know. I am resting my dear. I am not bothering I am resting. I suppose I shan't starve if I rest. Master Thomas Carlyle made a lot of "show your work". Well, I've got my work to show — and if God doesn't like it he can show it to Mr. Galsworthy who doesn't like it either — at least I don't think he would. Why shouldn't I rest. Lulu is quite happy indeed Merry at times, Alyse is looking for a title for her novel. It's hard to choose a good title.

Love and many kisses from Violet.

4 Patchin Place  
Nov 1st

Theodore my dear

Here is a Review of "Mockery Gap" wh. ought to please you; though there are some rather teasing remarks at the very end ... but you must understand that only very important and formidable writers are ever given a prominent place like this in the New York Times. It is not just an ordinary "review", placed among the "reviews", but a signed leading "feature article". However; little will you care! I know your nervous nature in these matters — and I daresay those sentences at the end will be more annoying to your mind (as it meditates on what this superficial bugger "has to say") than it will be pleasing to your mind to have so prominent a notice! But I assure you that a notice like this is a good sign — a straw on the wind ... a bit of sea-weed showing wh. way the tide is flowing — & you see this teasingly stupid Mr Percy (I think he has no more real idea of the way your mind works than — & probably less — your cat Peter) does at least have the wit to see that Mockery Gap is less "cruel" than Mr Tasker's Gods.

But what annoys me in it is that he seems to miss the humour of your writings

altogether. It is as if he were laboriously pointing out that Falstaff repeats the word God very often or that Pantagruel is too lavish of his “honest cods”.

Well — never mind — oh my Fyodor Carolovitch — the truth is that there are very few good reviewers in the world & we must be pleased by the sheer amount; just as if it were so many tons of coal for the winter, and not be particular as to the quality or whether it's hard coal or soft coal so long as it burns & we can warm ourselves at it!

Well — I herewith send many kisses to Violet. I do hope your “royalties” are enough for you to keep yourselves properly in such excellent beer as you gave me when I was with you. Bless you. J.

East Chaldon  
December 3rd 1925

My dear,

I have safely received your letter from the Hotel Farragut. I can assure you that I read that review with quiet pleasure because most of the others were so nasty that Mr. Muir's stood out amongst them as being different. But I am surprised that anyone should have bothered you with it. You are too good to me too generous. I don't understand how you can be so generous over anyone else's writings. Lulu is pretty well. I see him two or three times most weeks. He is good to me like you and praises this book. I don't praise his half as much as he praises mine. We see Alyse too, but not so often as Lulu. She is very busy. I ventured to Max Gate one day. I was received very kindly and sat in the same chair as Barnes. I wonder if you are really coming to England next summer. That would be a joy. I hope you will. It's all right about the gin, I don't seem to get so giddy now as I used to. Two young married ladies stayed in the village a little while ago who wore trousers. One of them has sent me the works of Chaucer as a gift. Llewelyn says this signing of peace-treaties is just C... & B... and I daresay he is right. I hope we shall both live to see one another again. Violet is well and happy — she sends you kisses. I trust that Littleton will be happy in orders.\*\* I don't see why he shouldn't be. I hope he will write poetry like G. Herbert. (Black clothes are a proud outer wear)

Yours ever Theodore

*From The Powys Society Collection, provenance doubtful, JCP's letters handwritten and (?) photocopies, TFP's typed transcripts with some obvious inaccuracies (thanks to Larry Mitchell for help with these).*

*The lead article in New York Times on Mockery Gap was by Percy A. Hutchinson, also probably the earlier anonymous review of Mr. Tasker.*

*Ducdame published in January 1925 in New York, in July 1925 in London.*

*Mr. Tasker's Gods published in London, February 1925, Mockery Gap in London, September 1925; both in New York later in the year.*

\* *Roddites: Squire Roddy in Mockery Gap is 'the far-famed discoverer of the little shells named Roddites'.*

\*\* *JCP's son Littleton had decided to train for the Anglican priesthood.*

*Llewelyn and Alyse returned to Dorset in May 1925. JCP had visited England in the summer of 1924 and went next in 1926.*

## *The Art of Unhappiness*

The early novels of JCP have been described as glum brothers: 'The mood of *Rodmoor* is neurotic, that of *After My Fashion* depressed, that of *Ducdame* tragic.'<sup>1</sup> The contention here is that rather than any reflection of the author's state of mind, of a writer tangled in morbid obsessions and struggling with a broken down and confused view of life, these novels and others that followed were written purposefully as vehicles of unhappiness, making JCP's positive and life-enhancing philosophy work by setting up and animating misery to generate specific effects. A straightforward exploration of happiness may well have worked for the popular philosophy books, limited by their own kind of textbook logic, but not within the deeper freedom of the novels, where JCP's approach to unhappiness is one of the principal sources of their unique quality.

JCP's darkest and possibly least liked novel, *Rodmoor*, illustrates this argument. *Rodmoor* is said to be: 'haunted by a feeling of isolation and menace';<sup>2</sup> where 'the desolate fens strike terror',<sup>3</sup> and further still: 'With its morbid philosophy, its lack of a strong central plot, its unbalanced and generally unlikeable characters, *Rodmoor* is a thoroughly depressing novel, the work of a mind close to breakdown'.<sup>4</sup> Through this novel we are said to: 'glimpse ... that underlying pessimism and gloom from which the writer escapes only through a philosophy of cheerfulness'.<sup>5</sup> Without disagreeing with these assessments – the relentless malice of characters, situations and atmosphere is enough to stick in the throat of the most loyal JCP reader – the interest here is in what this unhappiness reveals about the making of Powys's art both grotesque and delightful. It is an apparatus which Powys goes on to refine, but *Rodmoor* provides a broken-down engine by which to look at his machinery of fiction.<sup>6</sup>

Biographical evidence is a tempting means of explaining moods of novels, and perhaps all too easy. On the one hand, JCP in 1916 is in the doldrums: *Wood and Stone* wasn't selling, he was suffering from constant ill-health and the painful loss of Frances and isolation of his lecture tours. On the other, he's a successful public figure, able to command huge sums for his work, called upon as an authority to the *Ulysses* trial, the kind of person who could be courted by a world-renowned dancer. If this is unhappiness, it's a type which other writers might willingly have exchanged. JCP is like anyone, dealing with his daily mixture of bitterness and practical problems alongside the moments of respite, friendships and pleasures. The letters and diaries are a catalogue of responses to frustrations and anxieties. But isn't the tone of them evidence more of JCP's manner as a Romantic thinker and writer, than any genuine crisis? This is a writer of intense experience, of pain, death and the Devil transcended: the truth of his life is too complex, too 'multiversal', to be used as a simple guide to the heavens and hells of *Rodmoor*.

As for literary influences on JCP, who celebrated the realm of books as an element in which he could move and breathe with a heightened sense of existence, it's useful at least to acknowledge the traces visible in his treatment of unhappiness. The history

of English literature is one of indulgence in misery, from Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, through Thomas Gray's 'Elegy'; to Keats's soul-making in a 'World of Pain and troubles'. From the Middle Ages, we need to look beyond the relentless wailing over misfortunes and portents of doom, as 'the ground whence their soul will soar up to the aspiration of a life of beauty and serenity. For at all times the vision of a sublime life has haunted the souls of men, and the gloomier the present is, the more strongly this aspiration will make itself felt.'<sup>7</sup>

Greek literature is an obvious source of inspiration for JCP, and another influence, Nietzsche, describes Greek tragedy in ways which have a clear resonance with *Rodmoor*, both in its action and the emotional pitch of the language. For Nietzsche, Greek tragic art is a triumphant response to suffering, and a celebration of life – 'at bottom, in spite of all the alterations of appearances, indestructible, powerful and joyous'. Nietzsche envisages 'the *sublime* as the artistic conquest of the horrible', celebrating the Greek 'who has looked with bold eyes into the dreadful destructive turmoil of so-called world-history as well as into the cruelty of nature' and, without yielding to resignation or to 'a Buddhistic negation of the will', reaffirms life with the creation of works of art'.<sup>8</sup> JCP was well aware of this artistic cult of suffering, and on a technical level of the value of seeding unhappiness for literary effect.

A novel like *Rodmoor*, however, is not part of a genre. JCP's unhappiness is not aesthetic. It is an ugly, disconsolate thing, and this is the problem for any reader of *Rodmoor*. We generally need the gloom in novels to be satisfying in some way (a quality often crucial to commercial and critical success). Take a nearly contemporaneous example, from James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), of the way unhappiness is used in the story 'The Dead'. There is a poetic heightening, a frisson from shifting emotions, as Gabriel's sense of his identity is destroyed by his wife's memory of the dead boy who loved her, that are resolved into a delicate sadness. Joyce hits all the right notes: human vanity, lost love, an impassive universe. Gabriel's unhappiness is aesthetically charged, it 'packages' a worldly truth about human nature and experience as a 'value' which can be 'possessed' by a reader.

By contrast JCP is wholly unworldly. He does not attempt in *Rodmoor* to deliver a precious bittersweet truth, but a multiverse of unhappinesses, with no particular beginning and no end. There are no lessons to be learned in *Rodmoor*, the suicide of Stork and semi-suicide of Sorio, for example, are mostly anti-dramatic: ultimately a reader does not 'gain' anything, but is possessed *by* the experience described. There is no 'value' beyond the characters and their world.<sup>9</sup>

This nothingness is articulated through the constant presence of the sea: from the (anonymous) poem of the title page ('they saw neither the sun nor moon/ But heard the roaring of the sea') and as a physical and inescapable reminder of what is limitless and blank in existence. The first sight of the sea in the novel brings childlike cries of 'The sea!', but rather than holiday thrills, the discovery is solely of a 'menacing monotony' (26). The sea has a universal effect, a force of effacement which works relentlessly on its surroundings. The land around is 'doomed to changeless mo-

notony' (28), the 'misty horizons which seemed infinite in their remoteness', the sea reduces any physical distinctions, the 'monotonous stretch of grey sky, grey dunes and grey sea', and provides a sense that actions are endlessly repetitive, through its 'remorseless tide' (44). The effect is also psychological. The central character, Adrian Sorio, is unable to gather his thoughts due to the 'damned shish shish shish of the sea' (65); and as a local points out, 'It's a disintegrating place, you know, a place where one loses one's identity and forgets the rules' (147). This background of nothingness is not part of a philosophy of despair, but is JCP's blank canvas. Once life is reduced by the sea to include a dimension of 'not being' as much as being,<sup>10</sup> there is the ground and freedom for creation, stark and vivid. As Stork says, there is not 'anything so simple as the sea' (62). In one way, JCP shares Sorio's plan to write a book which demonstrates how the essence of life is destruction, because the 'blinding', 'annihilating' destruction brings about new life (III-13).

The *Rodmoor* sea is one of JCP's gods in the novel, like darkness and the earth. While its role may be to work at nothingness, tellingly, it is not a nothing in itself, it has an individual personality and a semi-existence. The sea speaks with 'a deep-drawn murmur' (26), in 'whispers' (68), its vast mouth 'swallows up the land' (47), with the 'inbreathing and outbreathing of some huge, half-human heart' (265). It is not the terrifying void but a part of human experience. Dark but familiar, the sea constitutes one part of an older element or reality which is beyond socially constructed ideas of good and evil. And the same idea applies to happiness versus unhappiness. The idea there are standard emotions living at opposite ends of a spectrum, 'good' at one end and 'bad' at the other, fixed and somehow tangible like objects which can be attained through effort or fortune, is arguably one of the underlying fictions of contemporary society. For JCP, strictly speaking, there is no happiness or unhappiness, only sensation and creation, the kind of travelling from one state to another which can amount to something closer to a poetic state of being – and perhaps similar to what Powys was later to express as 'hiraeth', the longing for the unobtainable.

The novel demonstrates this idea through a series of ambivalent scenarios which provide no straightforward progression to or from good and bad emotions, and serve only to rupture any sense of certainty of what is happiness and what is misery. One of these is where Nance and Linda, in despair at Sorio's cruelty and their isolation ('I'm sure we're all better off dead, than like this', 215) choose to walk into the terrifying, featureless blackness of the Fens where they take 'a morbid kind of delight in being cruel to themselves, in forcing themselves to do the very thing – and to do it in the dead of night – which, of all, they had most avoided, even in the full light of day' (218). It is here, and only here, that Nance finds an ecstatic intimation of what might be important in life.

She told herself that whatever henceforth happened to her or did not happen, it was not an illusion, it was not a dream — this strange spiritual secret. It was something palpable and real. She had felt it — at least she had touched the fringe of it — and

even if the thing never quite returned or the power of it revived as it thrilled her now, it remained that it *had been*, that she had known it, that it was there, somewhere in the depths, however darkly hidden. (221)

Another example is the jolliest scene of *Rodmoor*, where Dr Raughty and Mr Traherne entertain Nance and Linda in the tea-parlour, invoking Rabelais and buying chocolates, calling for them all to shake off pessimism in the wake of Stork's suicide. 'Courage and gaiety ... with a little milk of human kindness' (442) are celebrated as making life endurable, '[t]he sky, the earth, the sea – the great cool spaces of night – the sun, like a huge splendid god; the moon, like a sweet passionate nun; and the admirable stars, like gems in some great world-peacock's tail' (443); and even that bleakest of East Anglian towns appears to respond, its 'very pavements reflected the soft opalescent light which was spreading itself over Rodmoor' (443). But at the moment the reader expects a resolution, an antidote to all that has gone before, Nance and Linda expose the doctor and priest as 'babyish' (444), 'dear, absurd people' (445). This is not cynicism, but an essential current of honesty which creates a tension capable of energising both views, both the unabashed sensualists and the nervous sceptics.

At the heart of JCP's use of the idea of unhappiness is the question of individual relationships with 'reality'. Sorio is undone through an unflinching, reductive analysis of humanity and what he believes to be the stark truth of their motivations.

I've come to know, at last, what human beings are really like. I've come to see them stripped and naked — no! worse than that! — I've come to see them *flayed*. I've got to the point, Tassar my friend, when I see the world *as it is*, and I can tell you it's not a pleasant sight!...until you can hear their contemptible lusts hissing and writhing in their veins, like evil snakes – you haven't reached the point... You haven't reached it till every movement people make, every word they speak, betrays them for what they are, betrays the vulture on the wing, and the hyena on the prowl. (203–4)

By the time Sorio has completed his argument, the manifesto of misery has been shown to be a botch. The world in all its gentle multiplicity has shown itself, not through Sorio's gaze, but as if the world is observing itself.

The light on Sorio's face had faded with the fading of the glow on the water. There began to fall upon the place where they sat, upon the cobblestones of the little quay, upon the wharf steps, slimy with green seaweed, upon the harbour mud and the tarred gunwales of the gently rocking barges, upon the pallid tide flowing inland with gurgling and sucking and lappings and long-drawn sighs, that indescribable sense of the coming on of night at a river's mouth, which is like nothing else in the world. (203)

*Rodmoor*, far from being the unremittingly black novel it can appear, is starred with passages of this kind. An essential, unsentimental beauty shows through, unseen through the eyes of any character, separate and beyond any socially-constructed angst, a world of its own. The 'little' in this quotation is typical and it is worth taking note of these 'littles' throughout the book. They are regular intimations of the human scale, of the basic quality of everyday experience by contrast with the grand, ideal and

the abstract of rational thought: the 'little sea plant' (43), 'little pools of water' (364); 'little stuccoed entrance' (416), 'little garden' (416), 'little street' (417), 'little house' (421). The inanimate world shares its own world, a more reasonable, sane, sometimes blissful existence which contrasts so strongly with the socially-acquired neuroses and quirks of the main characters. Like the blue cow of the dairy shop where Adrian and Nance have their tea:

The ultramarine cow contemplated the universe as the newcomers took their vacated table with precisely the same placidity ... Perhaps in its ultimate resting-place its scorched fragments would become more voluble as the rains dripped upon the tins and shards around them or perhaps, even on the ruins - like an animal sacred to Jupiter - it would hold its peace and let the rains fall. (298)

Or on the sign of the Inn: 'the nameless Admiral saw the shadows of night settle down upon his sycamores ... he could not have confronted all that the unknown might bring more indifferently, more casually, more contemptuously.' (48) Here is the anti-Buddhistic 'religion' of JCP, the need to let ordinary life in, for the world to be dense as a hedgerow, filled both with little poisons and sweet fruits, in order to reach a more genuine form of 'truth'; or if not truth, then at least a more satisfying, occasionally even ecstatic experience. The opposite to this, a world wiped clear, unblemished and serene, is an inhuman hell (9).

JCP's art in *Rodmoor*, then, is not a question of the unity of yin and yang but the sparks created by their collisions. As he writes elsewhere, 'for a thing to be deeply poetical it must contain both truth and illusion, both beauty and ugliness, both good and evil.'<sup>11</sup> He generates the peculiar electricity of the novel, the thrill of tensions working between and against each other, using the friction with unhappiness and melancholy as a means of intensifying the crackle. This can be within a single character, such as the way Sorio's intellectual interest in a destruction instinct is accompanied by a more deep-rooted, physical need to protect and cherish life, like the 'little silvery fish' trapped in the fisherman's nets (116); or between a character and nature, with Philippa Renshaw's gothic/ romantic adventure into the woods: '[r]eleasing her fierce clasp upon the rough bark of the tree, not however before it had bruised her flesh, the girl dug her nails into the soft damp leaf-mould and rubbed her forehead against the wet moss.' (51). It can be within nature itself, in the image of the sea-created yellow horned poppy, 'spiked and prickly, these leaves, and their shape was clear-edged and threatening, as if modelled in sinister caprice' (246); or the contradiction of the Platonic ideal of beauty through the 'gargoyle' (120) priest Traherne, the only character seen to be blessed with access to 'indestructible joy' (118); or the daytrip to find a famous artist's house and finding instead the County Asylum (308). JCP is not interested in absolutes and completeness but the spaces between things, the ephemeral energy created by and between solid things, the faint essences and not the things themselves.

Unhappiness is a vital current in JCP's novels. As with many writers, early unhappiness steered him towards a life of literary expression. ('A happy childhood

has spoiled many a promising life'.<sup>12</sup> But the unpleasant grit to life, the anxiety and doubt, are seminal to JCP throughout his literary career. What could be more important to his writing than the experience at Coe Fen in Cambridge, or the vision provoked by the lichen on the old Cambridge wall which made clear exactly the type of literature he would write? The context to that epiphany is important. JCP was fulfilling an appointment with a writer who was 'of a satiric turn', a professional wit he knew would only be a reason for disillusion: 'it was my reaction from the sort of novelist I expected to encounter, and *did* encounter, that made the event so significant'.<sup>13</sup>

*Rodmoor* is testing for a reader, in its extremity of emotion, in its lack of treats and comforts. But as with the other novels, JCP attempts with *Rodmoor* to generate the kind of poetic vision which satisfies him, and it is only through using the raw materials of misery which he feels he can do this, authentically and with integrity, and able to recreate an essential complexity and magic in experience. In other words, stripping life to its grimmest bones, so that JCP's own brand of happiness -- so different from modern conceptions of happiness as possessions and ease -- is exposed and can run freely through his imagination.

**Tim Blanchard**

#### NOTES

All page quotations taken from *Rodmoor* (London: Macdonald, 1973; first publ. G. Arnold Shaw, 1916).

1 C. A. Coates, *John Cowper Powys in Search of a Landscape* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 28.

2 Glen Cavaliero, *John Cowper Powys: Novelist* (OUP, 1973), 27.

3 G. Wilson Knight, *John Cowper Powys: The Saturnian Quest* (London: Methuen, 1964; Harvester Press, 1978), 24.

4 Richard Perceval Graves, *The Brothers Powys* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1983), 120.

5 Harald Fawcner, *The Ecstatic World of John Cowper Powys* (Assoc. Universities Press, 1986), 221.

6 The view of *Rodmoor* as a basically 'happy' book has certainly been expressed before. Gilbert E. Govan in the *Sewanee Review* of 1938, for example, points to the dedication to Emily Brontë as being of the greatest significance, claiming the novel has 'the same ecstatic madness', 'an ecstasy produced by the joy of living'.

7 J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Pelican, 1955), 37.

8 Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton, 1974), 131.

9 The starkest expression of this view comes much later in *Porius* and *Drom*'s kiss: 'It was simply the kiss of life without the possibility of evil or the possibility of death. It was the kiss of that which couldn't mock, of that which couldn't cry, of that which had forever wiped away all laughter and all tears... It was the kiss of rounded identity, of perfect balance, of the reconciliation of all opposites, the kiss of absolute peace, the kiss of unutterable sameness, the kiss of pure divinity, the kiss of *anti-man*.' (*Porius*, Overlook, 2007, 573-4).

10 Wilson Knight, *op. cit.*, Preface.

11 John Cowper Powys, *Lucifer* (London: Macdonald, 1956), 19.

12 Robertson Davies, *What's Bred in the Bone* (Penguin, 1991). He also said: 'Happiness is always a by-product. It is probably a matter of temperament, and for anything I know it may be glandular. But it is not something that can be demanded from life, and if you are not happy you had better stop worrying about it and see what treasures you can pluck from your own brand of unhappiness.'

13 *Autobiography*, 199-200.



## Reviews

W. J. Keith

Revealing King Arthur, by Christopher Gidlow (Stroud: History Press, 2010)

### *Arguing about Arthur: The Latest Turn of Events*

Christopher Gidlow's *Revealing King Arthur* is, so far as I am aware, the first serious book about Arthur and Arthurianism to be published since I completed my *Glastonbury Romance Revisited*. Personally, I have some reservations about it, but wish to alert Society members to its existence because it could possibly signal yet another academic shift of attitudes to myth, history, and the past.

Some readers may remember that I pointed out how, when JCP was beginning to write *Glastonbury* in the early 1930s, Arthur was considered a mainly mythical figure with perhaps some vague basis in fact. Thirty years later, with all the media attention given to the excavation of Cadbury Castle (= Camelot?), the balance shifted and most specialists, a 'strong majority' according to R. S. Loomis, 'believed that he was a man'. Since then, the pendulum has swung decidedly in the opposite direction, and, thanks to the influence of Dark Age archaeologists, the 'mythical' verdict is now so entrenched that to argue that Arthur actually existed would be tantamount to academic suicide.

Gidlow, who is not an academic but what he calls 'an interpretation manager' interested in the way ancient sites are explained to the general public by means of information-boards, visitor-centres, and the like, believes that the present consensus is lopsided and needs to be challenged. He published one book on the subject, *The Reign of Arthur from History to Legend*, back in 2004. This did not seem to attract much interest, and I have to confess that it escaped my attention. But this new book is at least evidence of his persistence, and will almost certainly create controversy. In it, he charges the leading writers on the subject, notably N. J. Higham and Terence Green, and to some extent Francis Pryor – all of whose arguments I summarized – with being guilty of the same kind of bias and lack of logic that they found in the arguments of the historical faction.

As I noted in my preface, it is extremely difficult for a non-specialist to adjudicate when experts disagree, and although Gidlow hardly qualifies as an expert he appears to have done his homework and his book is in no way the work of an over-enthusiastic amateur. There are aspects of his position that bother me – especially his constant criticism of those in charge of archaeological sites for not mentioning possible Arthurian associations in their publicity, since I can readily sympathize with those who have no wish to encourage naïve and time-consuming queries from the romantically ill-informed. But the refusal of so many in this scientific age to accept the mythic and the legendary as anything more than ignorant falsehood is even more disturbing – as the Powyses knew only too well.

While Gidlow has little interest in Glastonbury and gives short shrift to Arthur's supposed burial-place in the Abbey, he recognizes the need for an imaginative

approach to these matters as well as academic and scholarly ones. (However, his assertion that it is 'no more conceivable that there wasn't a real King Arthur than that there wasn't a real Henry VIII' is surely going a bit far!) Since his battle is with the archaeological establishment, he makes no mention of JCP and *A Glastonbury Romance*, but it seems to me that, however successful or otherwise he may be in his 'search for the historical Arthur', JCP's novel-romance will have no difficulty in retaining both its interest and its impact.

### *Patrick Quigley*

Literary Somerset, by James Crowden (Flagon Press, 2010). £18.95.

I bought *Literary Somerset* before visiting Street for the recent Powys Society Conference. It was my first visit to the town and I wanted to know the literary background. Who could guess that Robert Bolt (playwright and screenwriter of *A Man for All Seasons*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, etc.) taught at Millfield School, Street, in the 1950s? As did John Le Carré in 1954 before he took up spying and fiction writing. An earlier teacher at this lucky school was John Jarmain, a young poet killed in World War Two. Who else will tell you about the nineteenth-century Eureka Machine in the Clark's Shoe Museum that can write a verse a minute?

James Crowden's book is much more than a literary guide-book: it is an encyclopaedia of the many forms of literary endeavour in Somerset from the anonymous eighth-century author of 'The Ruin', a poem on Roman remains in Bath, down to present-day rock star, P. J. Harvey. Crowden is a poet who lives in Chard and whose work is rooted in Somerset life and customs. His book, *Ciderland* (2009), tells all you need to know about that ancient and civilized industry.

The Powys family and Montacute are included with generous space given to Philippa/ Katie alongside her famous brothers. He tells about her secret lover, the fisherman she met on the clifftops. There are other illuminating mini-essays on T. S. Eliot (ashes interred in East Coker); the Waughs (like the Powys family, another Somerset literary dynasty), Hardy in Yeovil and many others. There's a fascinating mini-biography of John Cleese (born Weston-Super-Mare, where else?) who went on a Himalayan trek with the author.

Despite the cover picture of photogenic Glastonbury Tor, the book ranges far and wide. Crowden goes up and down every valley, scours every village and seaside villa for literary remains. As a result this rich volume approaches literary life from a refreshing variety of angles. A small sample of chapter headings include such gems as: 'The Romantic Lot'; 'Swanning around the Quantocks'; 'Eminent & Eccentric Clergymen'; 'Social Reformers, Orators & Rabble Rousers' and 'Hacks and Scribblers'.

Almost anyone who was anyone in English Literature (and many from Ireland) feature in the book. You wouldn't expect Jeffrey Archer to make an appearance – grew up in Weston-Super-Mare; or John Steinbeck – he lived for a year near Bruton

while researching his 'Acts and Deeds of King Arthur and his Noble Knights'. Still in the fantastic vein, J. R. R. Tolkien honeymooned in Cheddar Gorge and used the scenery for Helm's Deep in *Lord of the Rings*.

At this stage I'm scratching my head to discover who isn't included. I'd love to read more about the Rev. Joseph Wolff who started life as the son of a Rabbi, became a Church of England clergyman and walked naked for 200 miles across Afghanistan. Who could invent something like that? If you're looking for story ideas go no further! This is the ideal book to dip into for the sprightly-written entries and the many beautiful illustrations. My favourite is a photograph of 90-year old, Hope Bourne, nursing a wounded bird. She lived in remote cottages with her chickens and her trusty Winchester rifle and wrote several books on nature.

Modern life is often presented exclusively in urban terms. This book celebrates our long literary association with landscape (as does the work of the Powys clan). It is exhaustively researched and lovingly presented and makes an ideal present for any time of the year. It will be an indispensable companion on those future Powys conferences in literary Somerset.

### *Pollinger Literary Archives*

The records and papers of Pollinger Ltd, literary agents for JCP, TFP and Llewelyn, can now be examined at London Metropolitan Archives. The most interesting part of the collection relating to the Powyses, which is currently uncatalogued, spans a period from 1981 to 1988 and consists of correspondence between Gerald Pollinger, Francis Powys and Kenneth Hopkins. The letters from Gerald are carbon copies but the letters from Francis and Kenneth are all originals. This archive complements the major collection of letters from JCP, and Phyllis Playter to Laurence Pollinger, the founder of the firm, from 1944 to 1964, held at the National Library of Wales.

The collection at LMA also comprises ledgers from 1935 to 1973, and ledger cards from 1973 to 1990 covering author's payments, permissions, copyright, royalties, the development and use of the Powyses' works, as well as contracts.

If this sounds dry and routine it isn't! There's much to interest the Powysian student here – news of new foreign editions and translations such as *Ducdame* in Roumanian (which delighted Gerald and Francis), news of the discovery of a cache of letters from JCP to a correspondent in San Francisco, the copy of a beautiful letter from Kenneth Hopkins to Phyllis in 1961, and a moving description by Francis of the funeral of Phyllis. But the main focus of the correspondence lies in the exchange of letters about ambitious publishing projects – the 'Collected Works' of JCP in a uniform edition; a complete and unexpurgated edition of the diaries of JCP – 'his most important book' says Kenneth in a letter to Gerald; a Powys Handbook; the collected poems of JCP; the letters of JCP to Theodore Dreiser and his other American contacts (Arthur Davison Ficke, Charles Erskine Scott Wood, Clarence Darrow); the collected letters of JCP to Marian; a new complete edition of JCP's letters to Llewelyn in a

cloth binding; proposals for four twenty-minute programmes with readings from JCP's works on BBC Radio 3; television and film adaptations of *A Glastonbury Romance* and an opera based on *A Glastonbury Romance* with music by Richard Arnell and lyrics by Colin Wilson.

The collection includes some nostalgic ephemera: advance notices of Powys Society meetings in London at Liddon House in South Audley Street, a list of all the talks given to The Powys Society from 1968 to the early 1980s; and the first appearance of a newsletter – in those days called *Powys News* – on just two sides of A4!

This is a fascinating collection. The correspondence describes rise and fall of ambitions, hopes deferred and the birth of new ideas. The letters sparkle with vitality and tell a story of the daily trials and tribulations as well as the achievements of a literary agent and his relationship with his clients. The determination and energy of Francis and Gerald to engage with major publishers, inspire interest in the Powyses and make things happen is palpable. The letters shed light on the human qualities of the correspondents and their personal interests – there is frequent discussion of gardening and the weather, holidays in the south of France, travels on the Orient Express and the TGV and visits to museums.

More information about Laurence and Gerald Pollinger can be found in *NLs* 44 (November 2001, 5), and 54 (April 2005, 4).

For permission to access the Pollinger archive at London Metropolitan Archives send an e-mail to <ask.lma@cityoflondon.gov.uk>, or visit the web site, <www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/lma>, quote accession no: Bo8/076 and request boxes 82, 83 and 99.

**Chris Thomas**

*Children of Ysgol Carrog enacting the Owain Glyndŵr pageant (see page 11).*

