

ALSo...

The Journal of the Alliance of Literary Societies

Volume 16 – 2022

THE DAY JOB





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Editorial

Not all writers live by their writing alone. Many have or had 'day jobs' that paid the rent (or mortgage) and 'put food on the table'. T. S. Eliot worked in a bank, then became a schoolteacher, magazine editor and publisher. Had he chosen, following the success of *The Waste Land*, to devote all his time to writing, as his friend Ezra Pound did, he may have succeeded for a while, but he would have been a different type of poet. All the evidence shows that Eliot needed the security of routine to enable him to write. Other banker poets are thin on the ground. Only Vernon Watkins, a Welsh contemporary of Dylan Thomas, and Samuel Rogers, come to mind. Other writers have pursued full-time, quasi-intellectual/literary careers that fed their imagination. Philip Larkin was a librarian, as was Douglas Dunn. Ian Fleming was for a while a dealer in rare books, as was Ian Sinclair. Many have been journalists of one kind or another. Geoffrey Grigson began as a well-paid newspaper journalist and moved to an even better paid staff post at the BBC before he had the confidence to become a full-time freelance writer.

Other poets, however, have deliberately eschewed this obvious route to success by doing 'day jobs' that some poets might see as demeaning, but which enabled them to switch off their workaday minds to unleash their creativity. Such a poet was Peter Reading who, after art school, chose to work as a weighbridge operator for many years until he was forced by his employers to wear a uniform. He then resigned, as any self-respecting poet should and, through the support of his fellow poets and financed partly by grants, was able to pursue the life of a full-time writer. His was an extreme case, but doubtless there are other examples of writers who have undertaken seemingly undemanding work, even for a short while, to keep the wolf from the door. We know that Hugh MacDiarmid famously became a postman, which made him a genuine 'man of letters'. Charles Lamb was a clerk in the East India House for his whole working life while, incidentally, Thomas Love Peacock was an official there. Anthony Trollope was a devoted official at the Post Office. In the past, there have been farmer or farm-worker poets — the best known having been Robert Burns, Robert Bloomfield and John Clare. Nevil Shute was the only novelist I know whose day job was an engineer.

Countless other writers have pursued more intellectually challenging careers. Of the literary medics — Goldsmith, Smollett, John Keats, Thomas Beddoes, Robert Bridges, Somerset Maugham, William Carlos Williams, Alex Comfort and Dannie Abse — are the best known. Thomas Hardy trained as an architect. Other professions pursued have been teaching, law and insurance, though we can only think of two, Wallace Stevens and Kafka, who worked in this particular non-literary profession. Then, there are James Lees-Milne who worked for the

National Trust, and Bruce Chatwin who was Head of Antiquities at Sotheby's. Of university teachers who have written poetry, there have been many (perhaps *too* many) in the humanities. Only Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (aka Lewis Carroll), who taught maths at Oxford, could be said to qualify as someone who held a non-literary university post. But there may be others. Then, of course, there are many literary clerics, not least John Donne, Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne and Andrew Young. All of these clergymen had genuine 'day jobs' throughout their literary lives.

The challenge for this particular issue of ALS*o*, then, was to discuss how the day job of a writer might have given them material to develop their literary ideas, the time and opportunity to contemplate future projects and the necessary access to people who might inspire a writer of fiction or drama to create memorable characters. It is to be hoped that the six contributions to this special issue will throw valuable light on the challenges and benefits that a day job can offer a writer.

R. M. Healey

AL*So* 2023

We are pleased to announce that next year's theme will be:

'BETTER DROWNED THAN DUFFERS': Adventures by Land, Sea, Air and Imagination

Riding a fighting bear in the Arctic, flying to Neverland, disappearing down a rabbit hole, travelling with Johnson and Boswell in the Hebrides, sailing with the Swallows and Amazons, crossing the Alps on foot...the possibilities are endless. Please sharpen your pencils and tell us about your writers' adventures in reality or on the page. We welcome articles of around 1,000 words, presented as Word documents (please see our style sheet on the ALS website) and sent to r.healey709@btinternet.com by 1 May 2023. We look forward to hearing from you.

Our thanks to Linda Curry for helping to put this issue together.

Marty Ross

The Worlds of Charles Dodgson and Lewis Carroll

Stephen Folan

Lewis Carroll was the alter-ego of Charles Dodgson. When Charles Dodgson was not pretending to be offended at the attention Lewis Carroll was receiving for the success of the 'Alice' books, he was working at Christ Church College, Oxford, as a mathematics lecturer. However, Lewis Carroll's alter-ego had an equally interesting life outside his writing achievements.

In 1855, Dodgson became a mathematics lecturer at Christ Church with an interest in mathematics, algebra and logic. His main role was to prepare the students to pass the examinations. In his private life, he was a dabbler in areas such as art, photography, games, puzzles and writing. He wrote fiction after the 'Alice' stories, about two children, 'Sylvie and Bruno'. In addition, he wrote non-fiction, poetry, articles and pamphlets on many topics.

The first 'Alice' book was published in 1865 when he had already been working at Oxford for ten years. At the time, he was unknown as an author but better known as a leading portrait photographer with pictures of the poet, Tennyson, the Rossetti family and the actress Ellen Terry within his portfolio.

With his broad interests, if he was alive today, he would be unlikely to be an Oxford lecturer but more likely to be involved in Oxford in a start-up, using his skills in mathematics, technology, language and logic to develop technology solutions. His profile is like that of Larry Page of Google who had interests in music before studying computer science, or Richard Feynman, Nobel Prize winning physicist, who took art lessons in return for physics lessons.

The creative mind that fashioned Wonderland and the Looking-glass World was developed by exploring non-mathematical interests. In addition to the board games, word games, puzzles and ball games he invented, he also made a mechanical 'Bob the Bat' that flew around his room. Other inventions included the nyctograph which allowed you to make notes in the dark, and he developed the idea for an early version of the postal order as well as double-sided tape.

His joy for mathematics, geometry and logic problems is reflected in the 'Alice' stories. The dialogue from the famous Tea-Party scene below demonstrates how he combines language and logic to entertain.

Alice hastily replied; 'at least - at least I mean what I say – that's the same thing, you know.'

'Not the same thing a bit!' said the Hatter. 'You might just as well say that "I see what I eat" is the same thing as "I eat what I see"!''

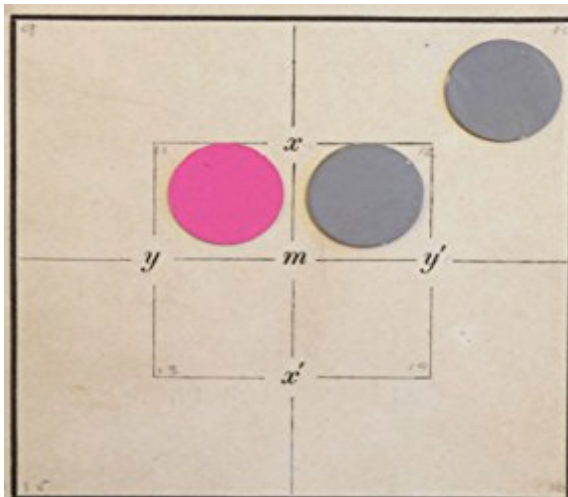
'You might just as well say,' added the March Hare, 'that "I like what I get" is the same thing as "I get what I like"!''

'You might just as well say,' added the Dormouse, who seemed to be talking in his sleep, 'that "I breathe when I sleep" is the same thing as "I sleep when I breathe".'

'You should say what you mean,' the March Hare went on.

He created the first puzzle storybooks with *Pillow Problems* (1880) and *A Tangled Tale* (1885). *A Tangled Tale* was developed from a series of problems he published in *The Monthly Pocket* magazine where readers were encouraged to submit solutions to a problem. His solution was published in a later edition with discussions of the readers' answers.

The 'Alice' stories combine Carroll's love of logic and language and are being used today as teaching content. Two teachers, Nitsa Movshovitz-Hadar and Atara Shriki, have used the stories as a basis for teaching elementary ideas of logic while bridging the gap between the abstractness of formal logic and its expression in a real-world context.



Perhaps he also invented recreational logic. His book, *The Game of Logic*, provided a visual means, a sort of Venn diagram, representing two propositions from which a logical conclusion can be drawn, using coloured counters. This was developed as a tool for teaching elementary logic, and he tested the idea for the game and the book through teaching it to young people.

His work is still well regarded amongst logicians today and there are articles in recent years that discuss his famous paradox, 'What the Tortoise Said to Achilles'. In this dialogue, he wonders how we can prove a logical argument without creating some rules for the logic structure behind it.

Without these assumptions, we must keep on building a supporting argument with ever more additional steps and never conclude as each new step needs further steps. You end up developing an infinite fractal model for the problem rather than something that looks good enough. This is also a modern data management problem.

In addition to all these activities he also contributed ideas to voting theory and wrote three pamphlets between 1874 and 1876. One of his proposals was a voting method that would achieve proportional representation — with respect both to the population in the regions and to the apportionment of seats to the political parties in the legislature. Another idea was the transferable vote where the candidate could transfer the votes allocated to him.

His playfulness can be seen in the ‘Alice’ stories and we can consider that his approach to mathematics and logic was enriched by the variety of his interests, and how they all fed off each other to provide him and us with great entertainment and great puzzles. These, in addition to the ‘Alice’ stories have given him a great reputation in his logical as well as his literary worlds.

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Charlotte Mary Yonge (1823–1901)

Teacher, Author – and Lady of the Parish

Clemence Schultze

‘If you find anything very nonsensical, you must remember it was written by your shatter-brained cousin of fifteen’, wrote Charlotte Yonge to her cousin Anne, announcing that her family had decided some stories written as a French exercise might be printed and sold for the benefit of a girls’ school planned for Otterbourne, her home village outside Winchester (Coleridge 137). These became *Le Château de Melville* (1839) and marked the start of Yonge’s career as a published writer. Occupation as a teacher – her ‘day job’ – had begun years previously, at the age of seven, when she began to teach in the Sunday school. Charlotte’s family lived with Mrs Yonge’s mother on her small property in Otterbourne, and at a time of great rural poverty they took seriously their duty to their neighbours. William Yonge provided what doctoring he could, and Fanny Yonge started a school in a cottage room.

Charlotte Yonge later reflected that it had been a mistake to let a seven-year-old become a teacher ‘for I had not moral balance enough to be impartial’ (Coleridge 95). She remembered with shame how she had helped a favourite pupil get unfairly to the head of the class, and then lied about it to her mother. She taught in the Sunday school almost to the end of her long life, and also gave regular lessons on weekdays. For example, in the 1870s, she was teaching the infant class to read, was examining the children orally in secular subjects, and was helping with ‘object lessons’ where items were brought into school for explanation and discussion. As a school manager, she was also present at the governmental inspections and sometimes wrote up the Inspector’s report in the school logbook. The effort she put into preparing her teaching is reflected both in the albums of pictures and extracts she amassed, and in the portrayal of her fictional heroines: while conscientious Sophy realises that

‘...this question does not grow out of the last answer ... that must have been what puzzled them last Sunday: they want connexion.’

her more frivolous sister Lucy observes

‘I can’t see the use of all this trouble ... Why can’t you ask them just what comes into your head, as I always do?’ (*The Young Step-mother*, 202)

In *The Daisy Chain* (1856), Yonge vividly recounts the setbacks and successes of her best-loved heroine Ethel May who starts a cottage school as a first step towards civilising the deprived hamlet of Cocks Moor. Along with the actual lessons go assistance with food and clothing, and incentives to self-help. All this was part of the ethos and experience of Yonge

and her family, much influenced by the leading Tractarian John Keble, Vicar of Hursley and Otterbourne.

As Yonge's reputation grew – especially after the spectacular success of *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) – she published many well-received novels and non-fiction (especially the *Cameos from English History*), as well as editing for over 40 years a magazine for young, mainly female readers, the *Monthly Packet*. Her first biographer, Christabel Coleridge, provides a description of her writing practice:

She frequently wrote her letters all at once, and often a story, a Cameo, and a bit of Scripture teaching at the same time, writing a page of each, leaving it to dry, and going on with another...it was a process which could only be watched with awe. (Coleridge 234)

She was, in fact, a busy professional writer, publishing a couple of books a year as well as undertaking a mass of reading and editorial work. For many years the income she earned from this was devoted to charitable purposes – most notably, the provision of a ship, the *Southern Cross*, for the far-flung mission to the Melanesian islands.

But this state of affairs changed dramatically in 1876. Her only brother, Julian, six years younger than herself and by now the owner of Otterbourne House, was threatened with bankruptcy after the failure of a coal mining company of which he was a director. Savings that Charlotte had gathered with a view to endowing the new parish of Otterbourne (now separated from Hursley) had to go instead to rescuing Julian from this disgrace (Mitchell). For the next quarter-century, in fact to the end of her days, she supported Julian and his wife, educating their six children and establishing them in life. For whatever reason (poor health, or disinclination?), Julian seems to have done little to help, beyond some translating and attempts at journalism. Charlotte sold her investments in government stock, disposed of her copyrights to various publishers, and borrowed large sums of money. Naturally, she continued her teaching and at least some of her financial provision to Otterbourne charities. For, in a sense, her 'day job' now was being a lady: putting a good face on things and making it appear that Julian Yonge was still a gentleman of independent means.

In this, Charlotte Yonge resembles the well-known instance of her close contemporary Margaret Oliphant (1828–1897) who supported her own children and several other family dependents. Like Oliphant, Yonge became her own business manager, capably negotiating deals with several publishers. She undertook commissions for relatively trivial works where seemingly it was her famous name 'by the author of *The Heir of Redclyffe*' that constituted

the attraction to buyers. She continued to write to the very end: her final novel, *Modern Broods*, appeared in 1900, the year before she died.

When Yonge's first full-length novel, *Abbeychurch*, was accepted for publication in 1844, a family conclave decided that the earnings should

be used for some good work – it being thought unladylike to benefit by one's own writings. Asked what she would have done if forbidden to publish, she quickly replied, "Oh, I *must* have written; but I should never have published – at least not for many years." (Coleridge 153)

There speaks the born writer; there too the dutiful daughter and sister, and the devoted parish lady and teacher of Otterbourne.

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Most of Yonge's works are freely available online: see www.cmyf.org.uk and go to page 'All works'.

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Franz Kafka at the Office

Simon Keeton

Franz Kafka is probably best known to English readers for his curious story of *The Metamorphosis* and, to a lesser extent, for his novels, *The Trial* and *The Castle*, which pose a lone figure struggling in his quest against a vast and all-encompassing bureaucracy within an urban and rural landscape respectively. The opening sentence of *The Trial* is possibly the most famous first line in German literature today.

The other well-known detail is that he was a minority in a minority: a German-speaking Czech Jew in the Prague of the late 19th century and early 20th century at the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. But, that is only half the story. The Jews had been encouraged to identify with the German nation and so were caught up in the tension between the Germans and the Czechs, with their burgeoning nationalism. Meanwhile, at the turn of the century, much of the old Jewish centre of Josefov, with its warren of streets, was rebuilt. While leaving many old, important sites alone, it left the people with a sense of upheaval and loss. Kafka's family moved several times during his youth, and he both lived and worked in the same reduced area in the Old Town.

It is true that Kafka wrote: 'What have I in common with the Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself.'

But this is more of an existential expression of isolation. He studied Hebrew and was very interested in Jewish theatre, Yiddish and Zionism. He also spoke Czech and said he had never lived with Germans. Even the German word for mother, Mutter, did not fit his context. In Prague, they spoke what was known as Paper or Prague German which his fellow writers made up for with overblown, baroque phrasing while Kafka retained a dry, incisive style.

There are many influences on a writer's work: his background, parents, education and place of residence. All of these are important for Kafka and left their mark on him, but here we must examine the effect of his job.

Franz Kafka, after a series of false starts at university level, studied law, followed by a one year legal internship, first in the Provincial High Court and then the Criminal Court.

The next year brought a temporary post in a private insurance firm in Prague before he found a long-term job in the Workers' Accident Insurance Company for the Kingdom of Bohemia. He had to mediate between the employers and the workers in cases of injury and

accident. There is a similarity between his prose and his reports for that institute, with legalistic language which had to cover all eventualities. Kafka built up his own style by piling up clauses in great detail as if looking through a zoom lens but without drawing back far enough to get the full picture. There is evidence that he first began by using a first person narrator in his novels. He soon changed to the third person, but with the same restricted viewpoint. That is to say, there was no omniscient narrator.

According to Gustav Janouch, his office had two black, polished double doors. One opened into his office, which he shared for years with somebody he did not get on with! The other led to other offices on the fourth floor of the building, where the WAIC was housed. But this door was never opened, a fact which reminds us of his preoccupation with doors and access as in the parable, *Before the Law*, where a door which was meant for the protagonist was finally closed. This is discussed in *The Trial* in a curious echo of the Talmudic tradition. The photographs of the inside of the building suggest long corridors and high winding staircases, like those near the court, in the novel.

The most telling aspect of his job was actually the fact that he resented it. His friend, Max Brod, thought he would have written more and better if he had not had to work, but there is probably a reasonable compromise which gives a tension and yet dynamism to the work of an artist, who needs solitude but also a public and participation in society. But, what weighed on Kafka was his lifestyle. His hours were from 8 until 2 and yet, instead of writing in the afternoon, he wrote in the night until the early hours of the morning. This is explained by his short text called *The Great Commotion*. He suffered from fatigue and insomnia but his fatigue came from his art rather than the job. He had a heightened sensibility and hated noise when he worked.

While Chapter 9 of *The Trial* is assumed to take place in St Vitus Cathedral next to Prague Castle, and he must have had the image of those streets in his mind, the trips he made to surrounding districts for his work, in order to visit local factories, also provided him with material and models. Friedland Castle, for example, in northern Bohemia, is said to be one of the models for his novel, *The Castle*, although he would have seen it from the point of view of the textile factory at the foot of the hill.

Kafka's Castle is actually not so much a castle as 'a wretched looking town, a huddle of village houses...'

What is seen in close up may not be the same as it is seen from a distance, as in a dream. People you are with may have a fluid identity. Things are not tied down to any formula and there is a lack of fit in the unfolding of events and characters.

Milena Jesenská, Kafka's Czech translator, who probably knew him better than anybody else, wrote to Max Brod that the simplest things were a mystery to him, including his own job, which he nevertheless carried out well, according to contemporary accounts.

But Franz Kafka was a man of extreme sensibility!

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Nevil Shute: The Day Job

Christopher Martin

Nevil Shute Norway was born in Ealing in 1899. He had a lifelong fascination with all things mechanical, and would bunk off school to visit the Science Museum, to be awed by Stephenson's actual Rocket, scale models of other trains, and models of flying machines such as those flown by the Wright Brothers and Blériot. Nevil Shute, to give him his pen-name, wanted to be commissioned into the Royal Flying Corps, but failed the medical due to a bad stammer. He took a degree in engineering at Oxford, which led to a career in aeronautical engineering. He started at De Havilland's and subsequently worked as chief calculator, or mathematician, under Barnes Wallis, at the Airship Guarantee Company, a subsidiary of Vickers, on the gigantic R100 airship and, in 1923, learnt to fly. His work was about measuring and checking the stress on the airship's frame. In 1924, he became a test observer.

To relax, Shute would write in the evenings. Initially he wrote poetry, before trying the novel form. He believed in learning by doing. He was persistent. Two early efforts were rejected, until Cassell took up *Marazan* in 1926. The protagonist, and teller of the tale, is an air taxi pilot, Captain Philip Stenning, a composite of figures Shute had known in the flying world. Near the start of *Marazan*, an overworked Stenning crashes his plane and is rescued by an escaped convict, Compton, whom he then tries to help out of gratitude for saving his life. Naturally, the following action involves much flying, but also sailing and motoring, all of Shute's main pleasure pursuits outside of writing. The plot involves drug smuggling, which Stenning first gets wind of at the Marazan Sound in the Scilly Isles, one of several locations as convincingly evoked as the sensations of flying, sailing and driving. The novel has pace, and references machines as up-to-date as the airship Shute was working on. Men are the main figures in the novel. There are silences when Compton's girlfriend Joan is about, more effective than the somewhat stilted dialogue.

Marazan was published under Shute's two Christian names, as he did not want his novel-writing to impinge on his aeronautical career. *So Disdained* (U.S. title: *The Mysterious Aviator*) (1928) and *Lonely Road* (1932) followed, also in the 'action' genre, and featuring planes, pilots, gun-running, with the rising forces of communism and fascism playing in the background. In 1930, he flew on the R100 to Canada and back, but when the rival publicly-funded airship R101 crashed later in the same year, with Lord Thomson, minister of aviation, among the fatalities, Britain's airship programme was cancelled. The enterprising Shute then co-founded a plane-making company in 1931, which he called Airspeed. This was initially based in and around York, but the need for more space led the firm to make a deal with

Portsmouth Corporation, who built them a work base at the city's aerodrome, and the firm relocated there in 1933. Shute, who always had contacts, helped gather a team of aeronautical designers and engineers to develop planes for small airlines, with scope for innovation, and soon had a workforce of 400 men, who were first set to work on gliders. As one of the firm's managing directors, Shute felt responsible for the men and their families, and was so fully involved in supervising production, that he took a five-year break from writing.

Much of Shute's energy would be taken up in finding financiers and suppliers of engines and other parts, to keep production of Airspeed's planes flowing. There was a demand for their products, but there was always competition too from bigger firms. The Corporation built four extensions. The firm's overdraft grew and grew. Shute himself was putting in his own money, so it was a relief when he sold the film rights to *Lonely Road*, which was realised by Ealing Films in 1936. The following year, an Airspeed Envoy was ordered for the King's Flight. As Shute notes in his memoir *Slide Rule: The Autobiography of an Engineer* (1954): 'With this order, I think Airspeed reached the peak of its career. Whatever the profit and loss account might show, no company could receive a higher endorsement of the quality of its products than we had received'. After that, he believed, he began to 'lose interest in the company I had brought into being. Civil work was coming to an end and all new design projects were of a military nature'.

In early 1938, Shute departed from the board of Airspeed, with a generous settlement with 'enough money to keep myself for five or six years at my then standard of living'. In that same year he published another novel *Ruined City* (U.S. title: *Kindling*). He followed this with *What Happened to the Corbetts* (U.S. Title: *Ordeal*) (1939), written a year before the Second World War, predicting the effects of bombing on a port city. Medical details such as those concerning gas attacks were always checked with Shute's doctor wife, Frances. *What Happened to the Corbetts*, as David Francis's *Portsmouth Novelists* (2006) relates, 'is set in Southampton but, according to a note provided by the author himself and tipped into the copy in the Portsmouth Central Library, the locale is based on Helena Road, where he was living at the time'. He lived at no.14, 'Norway House', between 1936 and 1940. As well as a blue plaque from the council, there is also a black plaque featuring a gold wren beside the front door. His much later *Requiem for a Wren* (U.S. title: *The Breaking Wave*) (1955), does have a few mentions of Portsmouth too.

With the outbreak of war, Shute joined the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve as a sub-lieutenant in the miscellaneous weapons department, rising to lieutenant-commander in 1941. His novel *Landfall: A Channel Story* (1940) is, in David Francis's words, 'a

contemporary adventure/love story. Portsmouth and its surroundings form most of the background ... ' It was very positively reviewed by George Orwell. This book and the subsequent *Most Secret* (written in 1942, but not published till 1945) could hardly fail to reflect Shute's maritime and secret weapon work. As a now noted author, he was sent by the Ministry of Information to observe the Normandy landings, and went to Burma as a correspondent in 1945. *No Highway* (1948) and *Round the Bend* (1951) were further titles with aviation backgrounds. He travelled widely, adventurously, and with great curiosity, taking in other parts of the Far East and Australia, where he and his family settled in 1950, the year he saw one of his most celebrated books into print, *A Town Like Alice* (U.S. title: *The Legacy*), a love story featuring prisoners of war under the Japanese.

Post-war, and into the atomic age, Shute felt the need to warn the world about the threat of nuclear weapons. There was a long gestation for what is widely regarded as his greatest novel, *On the Beach* (1957), set in Melbourne in the aftermath of nuclear devastation. *What Happened to the Corbetts* warned about the effects of aerial bombardment. *Slide Rule* is half-focused, didactically, on the R101 disaster. He tells the story of the R100 and R101 in detail, for lessons that might be learnt. It is sobering. Shute lost a number of flier friends to crashes and war. For the details, pilots would always love his books. They knew he knew his stuff. Nevil Shute died in Australia in 1960, and his ashes were scattered in the Solent.

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Three Ways of Looking at Wallace Stevens

Marty Ross

'The Comedian as the Letter C'

When Stevens wrote this lengthy and difficult poem in the early 1920s, he had settled down to his life as a married man and a lawyer engaged in insurance work at the Hartford Accident and Insurance Company in Connecticut, eventually becoming a vice president and earning an annual salary of \$350,000 in today's equivalent money. His marriage was desperately unhappy and, at 40, he had not yet published his first book of poems, *Harmonium*, which contains most of his well-known poems ('Sunday Morning', 'The Emperor of Ice Cream', 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird', 'The Snow Man').

Five years earlier, he had been living in New York City, part of the avant-garde circle of artists and writers surrounding New York socialites Walter and Louise Arensberg, which also included Marcel Duchamp, William Carlos Williams and Man Ray. A member of this group said their credo was: 'Beauty for the eye, satire for the mind, depravity for the senses.' Stevens may not have quite embraced the latter – he was a newly married man after all – but 'The Comedian as the Letter C' overflows with mischief and humour and beautiful, if mystifying, language. Sense is more than a little difficult to grasp. Go with the sensuous flow and delight in the flamboyant, rococo language: 'Making the most of savagery of palms,/Of moonlight on the thick, cadaverous blooms/That yuccas breed, and of the panthers' tread.' As one critic has commented: 'Stop when exhausted.' It might not take long. Geoffrey Grigson commented that Stevens' poetry was like 'a stuffed goldfinch'. Another critic wrote that his poetry is 'so objective and elusive, and so removed from the experience of the average reader, that the majority of the poems remain ... beautifully phrased and cadenced enigmas.' An exchange with Robert Frost went: 'The trouble with you, Robert, is that you write about subjects'; 'The trouble with you, Wallace, is that you write about bric-a-brac.'

Deep down, the young modernist writer in bohemian New York, on the cutting edge of change in art and literature, felt compelled by his background to settle down into a respectable life, with a respectable wife, and a respectable career. Deep down, he was a hick from Hicksville, and he knew it.

'The Emperor of Ice-Cream'

Stevens was born in 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania, a red-brick town of brewers and steelworkers of Pennsylvania Dutch, Lutheran stock. His grandparents were farmers, his father a respected lawyer with a strong work ethic, and his upbringing was a deeply religious one.

His father enabled him to go to Harvard, where he studied French and English literature, but he was expected to become serious and settle down into a career after graduating. He spent his 20s as a lonely young man in New York City, trying to make a living as a freelance journalist, living in a series of ratty boarding houses, writing poetry as and when he could and so depressed that he considered suicide. His time in the avant-garde circle of the Arensbergs was short lived. He trained as a lawyer and was temporarily heartened by his marriage to Elsie Kachel, who was uneducated, pretty, and from the wrong side of the tracks in Reading (i.e. poor). His father deeply disapproved, and father and son never spoke again after his marriage.

Elsie felt out of her depth in New York City and retreated into herself, eventually becoming agoraphobic. After the birth of their only child, the two had separate bedrooms in Hartford: Wallace in the master bedroom, which became his study as well; Elsie and their daughter in the servants' bedrooms. During a later visit to the couple, a family relation was served a lovely meal prepared by Elsie, who then retreated and ate by herself.

In his prime, Stevens resembled most of the white, middle-class businessmen I grew up among in Pennsylvania: a big, overweight man in a huge overcoat, fedora, suit, and shoes shined daily. (Donald Trump is in more ways than one a throwback.) A man with oversized appetites for food, alcohol and tobacco, who was casually sexist and racist (the shoes were most likely shined on his walk to work by a Black man working on the street, as my father's were). Stevens' escape in winter was to travel with a group of Southern friends, 'the boys', to Key West, where he drank to excess (on one occasion having a fistfight with Hemingway, which he lost, though he landed one good punch, breaking his hand in two places). He was also seduced by the warm air, flora and fauna – a pervasive influence in his poetry. Chilly Hartford vs the balmy tropics; a cold profession vs a warm vocation. He never travelled to Europe, though he could have afforded it. Helen Vendler writes: 'His work apparently did not interest him, nor did his companions at work.' After his death, his boss commented, 'Unless they told me he had a heart attack, I never would have known he had a heart.'

One of the most shocking juxtapositions in modern poetry occurs in 'The Emperor of Ice-Cream'. In the first stanza, men and women in a Pennsylvania Dutch farmhouse kitchen are making ice cream (the 'muscular one' is needed for the final churning as the mixture thickens). In the second stanza, the corpse of a woman with 'horny feet', who is 'cold' and 'dumb', is laid out in a bedroom upstairs. The refrain is, 'The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.'

Ask a small boy what he is emperor of when his ice cream cone melts down his shirt or has gone splat on the pavement. He is emperor of nothing. Of nothing at all.

'Nomad Exquisite'

Stevens early on renounced conventional religion, most famously in his great poem 'Sunday Morning'. Although he led such a humdrum and seemingly loveless life, he never stopped searching for the truth, for the sublime; he never stopped doing the poet's work of paying attention; and, lonely as he was, he never stopped writing poetry. In the end, he could say: 'Over all these the mighty imagination triumphs ... Hear what he says/The dauntless master, as he starts the human tale' ('Puella Parvula'). He truly was 'a dauntless master', in many ways heroic. I like to think of him best as a young poet entranced by Key West in 'Nomad Exquisite', drinking in 'the immense dew of Florida':

Beholding all these green sides
And gold sides of green sides,
And blessed mornings,
Meet for the eye of the young alligator,
And lightning colors
So, in me, come flinging
Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames.

Astonishingly, Stevens converted to Catholicism on his deathbed.

Insurance, perhaps?

A note on sources

I find Stevens' poetry extremely difficult and do not claim to be anything other than a tentative explorer in the foothills of his poetic and philosophical mountains. Sources that I have used and that have been helpful to me in writing this article (including the final joke about insurance on his deathbed) are:

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‘Very well then, journalism...’: the Day Job of Geoffrey Grigson

R. M. Healey

When Geoffrey Grigson went down from Oxford with a third class degree in 1927, he had no fixed idea of what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. In his autobiography, *The Crest on the Silver* (hereafter *Crest*), he admits that he had probably chosen the wrong subject to study and had neglected his books in favour of chasing girls and running up debts. Following graduation, he had returned to the family home in east Cornwall and had spent most of a year amusing himself in the same way he had been doing for much of his childhood and youth.

His mother chided him for his lack of gumption, but this had little effect. His father, the Vicar of Pelynt in east Cornwall and nearly 60 years his senior, doesn't seem to have had any influence whatsoever. It might have helped had the two older brothers closest to him not been killed in the Great War. Those siblings who had survived the conflict had fled the family home years before. Then, at last, possibly as a result of boredom or guilt, but perhaps inspired by his father's roots in Norfolk, and certainly with the help from a cousin, he applied for a post as the junior assistant to the export manager at Colman's in Norwich. He was interviewed and selected, but when it came to confirm the offer of a job, he wrote back to say that he had changed his mind. The lure of a summer in Cornwall contrasted with August heat in a Norwich mustard factory had played their part in the decision.

More indecision and further imprecations from a worried mother followed until, at Christmas 1927, an offer to teach for a month at a crammer in the Home Counties arrived at the Vicarage. Partly to please his parents and partly to earn some much-needed money, he accepted and soon found himself stuck in a 'private Borstal', inhabited by a number of 'pleasantly stupid adolescents' variously 'expelled from famous public schools, children of directors, children of great houses; all of them from wealthy parents, all of them insecure behind their security'. One term in this 'Kingdom of the Incomplete' had convinced Grigson that school-teaching was probably not for him and so he seems to have decided to enter journalism. After some rebuffs from papers in the West Country and discouragement in London from the magazine editor J. C. Squire, he serendipitously ran into someone he had known at Oxford who suggested he try the *Yorkshire Post* office in London. He was interviewed by its London editor, Arthur Mann, and, as a result, was offered a junior position at a pound a week.

The point of all this is that Grigson doesn't seem to have seen himself as a professional writer. As a boy, he had simply pleased himself by rooting for ancient arrowheads in the

Cornish soil, fishing at midnight, and categorising plants. At his hated public school in Leatherhead, he was a keen nature photographer and had contributed to the school magazine, but all these activities were seen as merely hobbies, though they did lead him to question whether he had chosen the right subject to read at Oxford. Dissatisfied at the largely philological route that English had taken under such figures as Tolkien, he had toyed with the idea of swapping this discipline for botany. But this came to nothing. All he knew for certain was that he had no interest whatsoever in following his father into the Church. As for writing professionally, apart from contributing the odd antiquarian notice to local newspapers in the West Country, he had little to show as a budding journalist in 1927. Looking back in *Crest* he asked himself a question:

Why the devil did I become a journalist? As many others do, for want of something better and through the belatedness of any collected knowledge, not so much of myself as of the possibilities of being alive. I wanted to write; but what exactly what, did I want to write? I had written poems for six or seven years, I had seen a few of them printed while I was an undergraduate. I had kept journals earlier still, which were mainly a record of birds'-nesting, and watching birds and catching fish. I had acquired already a jackdaw's nest of unrelated knowledge which was useful enough in Fleet Street. Very well then, journalism ...

But, a journalist he had become, almost by accident, and he seems to have flourished in this demanding role. Most graduate journalists today start as humble reporters on provincial newspapers, and then move on to more serious organs, but here was Grigson, at just 23, a junior leader writer of the 'London Letter' and book reviewer at one of the most respected pillars of the Tory establishment in the land. Only the *Morning Post* and the *Daily Telegraph* were more popular among Conservative voters. Not that Grigson shared the political stance of these newspapers. In *Crest*, he called himself a socialist at that time. At his interview, he had doubtless worked out that it was unwise to declare any divergent political affiliations, and anyway his interviewer probably assumed that, as the son of a clergyman in a county dominated by Tory landowners, he was at best a sympathiser, or at worst politically unaligned. Doubtless, had he mentioned that in his last year at Oxford, he had joined some of his fellow undergraduates in breaking the General Strike at Hull by loading and unloading cargoes at the docks, this would certainly have endeared him to his interviewer.

Although he admitted that he had wanted to write, we don't exactly know whether the young Grigson saw his role as a journalist on a national newspaper as eventually leading to a career as a freelance writer. Not all newspaper journalists become novelists, poets or non-fiction writers. What we do know is that his literary talents were recognised from the start.

We can't easily distinguish what he contributed as a leader writer, since these were unsigned, but the signed book reviews are testimony not only to his skills as a critic, but also to his intellectual maturity. Some of his tastes were fostered under the influence of such *Yorkshire Post* colleagues as Francis Watson, a junior like him who later was to become head of the Wallace Collection, but at that time was in charge of the book pages of the *Post* and as such gave Grigson an occasional book to review. Other journalists doubtless had their influence on him. Grigson's tastes in modern literature had already been acquired at University, possibly through reading outside the curriculum — mainly Ezra Pound, Eliot, Joyce and D. H. Lawrence.

Watson also turned Grigson's attention towards the visual arts by taking him to private galleries, notably the Leicester Galleries and those in Bond Street. But, it was Arthur Mann, the editor, a Yorkshireman in his late 40s, who became his chief mentor.

He had a delightful way, while keeping his own opinion, of deferring to his juniors and making them feel they were not altogether inept ... He wrote novels. I am afraid they were obvious and tedious; but he never insisted upon them. They were the least valuable of his activities and of much less account than himself and his speculative way of mind, even if it was speculation on hazy premises. If in politics he was a Tory, the younger man and I were rebels, or I was a rebel in his wake if nothing more precise. But the L.E. was too inquisitive to be a Tory in letters...

It seems to have been the Principal Editor of the *Post* who was happy for Grigson to write the obituary of D. H. Lawrence in 1930. Grigson admired him for this because 'in general other obituarists of Lawrence' enjoyed spitting at the corpse. I know that the *Times* outdid itself in brevity and insolence ...' Grigson learned the dirty tricks of journalism on the *Post* — ploys which perhaps served him well when he became an editor himself of *New Verse*, which lasted for nearly six years. He also learned 'more than a bit about politicians and businessmen and rich men with great power.'

One of them was among the richest men in Yorkshire and was another director of the *Post*. In the first week of every month a wire came down the private line demanding that he should be sent up the free office copy of Blackwood's in the next train parcel ... I began to learn also something of the wilful nastiness and dirtiness of one man towards another. I watched a case rigged against another young journalist in order to remove him and make a place for an elderly and useless and inoffensive little drunk who was out of luck but had been a colleague once of the intriguer. I watched with surprise machinations against myself - with surprise not because they were against

me but because I had not met, even at a public school, the deliberate planning of evil for the sake of advantage.

Luckily, Grigson spied the draft of a letter containing the false accusations levelled against him and, having discovered the final version which had been sent by hand to the Editor's in-tray, destroyed it. Such lessons in life doubtless proved invaluable when Grigson joined the BBC in 1941, first as a journalist at the Listening Centre in Wood Norton, near Evesham, which he hated, and subsequently as a Talks Assistant and Producer in Bristol. Having to deal with editors who might cut his copy, or with envious colleagues who wished him gone, made Grigson resilient to the pressures of life as a journalist in the hothouse atmosphere of Wood Norton during wartime, where giant egos from all over Europe were cooped up together performing valuable monitoring duties that can now be compared to those undertaken at the more famous Bletchley Park. If he had been a rebel as a newspaper journalist, this attitude was dampened somewhat by the necessity of obeying wartime rules that prevailed along with the physical presence of sentries and barbed wire, but this claustrophobia, if anything, reinforced Grigson's dislike of authority.

Naturally, as at the *Yorkshire Post* and the *Morning Post*, where he had been head-hunted, there were rules and deadlines to consider when producing talks for the BBC's Western department but, on the whole, Grigson was left to his own devices as he interviewed MPs and government ministers, farmers, millers, aerodrome workers, parsons and gypsy knife grinders. But, Grigson did not resent discipline when it was based on sound reasons, which it hadn't been at Wood Norton. As long as he produced the interviews on tape (or wire as it was then), he could spend time wandering around Cornwall with his friend John Piper.

When he was promoted to the role of Talks Producer with an office in Bristol there were greater responsibilities, but Grigson did not shirk these either. His new powers instilled him with great self-confidence and, on leaving the BBC in 1945, he carried this resilience over to his new life as a freelance writer and broadcaster.

The life as a rather timid junior journalist at the *Yorkshire Post*, where he had actively sought advice from his mentors, must have seemed a long way away. Nevertheless, with total freedom came the fear of failure. In a poem, 'David Hume' he compared himself with the great philosopher who had been torn between the comfort and security of patronage and a new and insecure life as a full-time writer. He chose the latter as we all know, and Grigson seems to have been inspired by his example to take a similar course. He was now writing 'for cheques', as he later called it, rather than for the generous BBC salary of £800. As such, he was now subject to the vagaries of the BBC producers, some of whom he had known personally when he had worked at the Corporation. According to his BBC colleague and

friend, Frank Gillard, Grigson, though happy enough at Bristol, had never gone into the BBC with the aim of making it a long-term career. 'Geoffrey at heart was not altogether delighted at spending his time producing other people's work. He wanted to be the chap at the microphone presenting his own work'.

And so he prospered. The 'day job', as it were, had inured him to all forms of criticism, to the machinations of fellow journalists, to bullies of all kinds and to the politics of the BBC and the press. Journalism had taught him to survive in a hostile atmosphere, but he was now free to exercise the creative abilities he had learnt. He continued to publish poetry. Some of his radio projects were happily accepted; others were rejected out of hand, but this did not deter him. He had greater success with his books, a few of which became best-sellers, including *Crest*, which contained reworked material from articles and radio broadcasts. By the mid-fifties he had become one of the most popular voices on radio and a poet and critic respected throughout the English-speaking world.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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Like Wallace Stevens and John Updike, **Marty Ross** was born in Reading, Pennsylvania. There the comparison ends. She is chair of the ALS.

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