The Great Modern Poets

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Extract

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Introduction

In the twentieth century, poetry in English became more diverse and exciting than ever before. New varieties of English from America, the Caribbean, the Antipodes, India, North Africa and elsewhere, found their way into poetry, and new kinds of poetry were written. Traditional forms were sometimes reinvented; Modernism emerged with its insistent breaks with the immediate past, its different inventions, 'making it new' with elements from the distant past and from cultures remote in time and space. Poetry became a place of creative and critical conflict. A plethora of groups and movements emerged, defining themselves in opposition to one another or in relation to the past. Some – Imagism, for example – proved radical and important, marking a new point of departure for poetry; others were merely ephemeral, having more to do with marketing than with invention.

In any event, the old order changed, though at every stage a majority of writers and readers resisted the new and the alien. Modern poetry was seen as not rhyming, even when it did rhyme; as obscure and difficult, even when it was at its most lucid and limpid. The man or woman in the street, by the middle of the century, had rather a low opinion of the art, as though it had fallen on hard times in more ways than one. People 'knew what they liked', and it certainly wasn't that hard stuff they had been exposed to at school: Yeats and Eliot, Pound and Auden. They liked the sounds Dylan Thomas made, but what did it mean?

At the same time, because modern literature began being taught in school not long after the Second World War, specialist languages for describing modern poetry were evolving within academia. As strategies for reading and interpretation developed, poetry was incorporated into the syllabuses and, indeed, universities became one of the chief employers of poets.

Some poets still addressed a general reader, but at a level of not too taxing entertainment. The popular poem was generally short, memorable, either romantic or satirical. The long poem, the thought poem, the complex narrative and sustained satire, the elegy, the dramatic poem, were objects of study rather than of pleasure. Then poetry in performance began to revive what had been the popular readership for poetry. Poets would select for public recital poems which, in their view, an audience might grasp and enjoy. In due course, a performance poetry culture emerged, one in which what mattered was less the text on the page than its delivery, and the performer and audience became part of an almost collaborative process which might also entail music and dance. The successful performance poet could address enormous audiences on stage, through radio and television, and the book in such instances became little more than an inert programme or libretto, superfluous to the requirements of an audience and linguistically and aurally meagre on the page.

This anthology sets out to present some of the best poetry of the twentieth century, all of it written to be read, and to be read aloud, though not in the first instance to be performed. Each of the poets in this book intends the poem to be sounded. The reader who reads only for sense, rapidly running an eye across the lines without hearing the way the words work together, without getting the tongue, lips and teeth involved in the verse itself, will miss the poetry and probably the sense as well. This is because in poetry much of the sense and most of the pleasure reside in the sounds the poems make, the ways in which accented syllables balance with unaccented syllables; how the alliteration and assonance (the repetition and patterning of consonants, or of vowel sounds, within a line or over several lines) enact the sense, contribute to the tone; how the poem creates patterns of expectation through sound, and then plays variations, reversals, inversions. The reader does not need a technical vocabulary to read poetry (although a glossary is provided in this book to demystify some of the language commonly used when discussing poetry), only a voice in the head or out loud which can deliver the sounds. And in that delivery resides the crucial sense of the poem, a sense which entails pleasure.

The problem most readers have is that they want to understand through paraphrase. They want to compel the poem to make a prose statement. At school I was taught that poems have 'hidden meanings', which one could get at only by means of analysis, but once located the poem could be 'understood' and its magic in some way controlled. The opposite is true. Poems are wonderfully open, democratic spaces. They may ask us to read them several times before we understand the balances and contrasts, the lights and shadows, that they offer, but they are for the most part not deliberately obscure. Few make sense in the way prose makes sense. Those that seem to – Robert Frost's, for example, or William Carlos Williams's, or John Betjeman's – probably mean rather more than they seem to and they require more focused attention from us. No good poem makes common sense: the essence of a good poem is the uncommonness of the sense it makes. It is a structuring of words in which many meanings, or meanings at many levels, are enacted. If we read poems as prose, they have very little to say.

Prose and poetry are different in construction. You can lie back to read prose, and you can read it fast. You extract meaning from it: narrative, information and the like. You use it to tell things and it is generally an instrument of exposition and analysis, standing outside the things it names. Poetry, on the other hand, requires a different kind of attention and concentration. Not academic concentration, but rather a close attention to the actual language on the page, the words in this particular order, the stanzas in this particular shape, the rhymes falling where they fall, the effect they have on the ear and on the imagination. Prose uses the medium of language while poetry serves language and explores it.

Anyone who loves language, the ways in which a word carries its etymologies, for example, its history, and the ways in which in combination with other words those histories are elicited, is in serious danger of loving poetry. Those who love nursery rhyme and nonsense poetry are ideal readers of modern poetry. Not because modern poetry is nonsense – for that matter, nonsense poetry and nursery rhymes are themselves never nonsense either: think of the feelings they evoke, think of how they play the tongue and the heart. Such readers know that in poetry the sense is to be found in the sound as well as in the meanings of the words.

As for obscurities of reference, in Pound for example, and difficulties in argument or narrative, as in Yeats, Stevens and Auden, if the reader reads on and does not stop and puzzle and turn to reference books or Google, but finishes the poem, and then comes back and reads it again, in time (poetry being a language of accrual) the difficulties will resolve themselves. Eventually it may be useful to visit a dictionary or an atlas, but not until the sounds have lodged in the head. Often the context tells the reader as much as it is necessary to know.

I have tried to include some extracts from long poems and, in some cases, I represent a poet by a longish single poem. The short poem is everywhere privileged today: in magazines, newspapers, on radio, it is the column filler, the sound bite, the morsel. New readers who enjoy the ways in which language works will, in time, develop a hunger for sustained writing, perhaps the verse novels and epics of Les Murray and Derek Walcott, or the wonderful verse essays and sequences of Eliot, Pound and Auden.

Choosing 50 poets to represent a century was no easy matter. I have excluded most poets of my generation and the ones after on the grounds that their work belongs more to the twenty-first century than to the twentieth: it seemed wilful to confine them to an era which the millennium so decisively closed. Those that I have included are there because they made a substantial difference to the last decades of that century. More painful for me was the omission of poets whose work I love but who were too experimental for this kind of introductory volume, or who wrote only in extended forms and resisted excerpting, or who did things with language which others, represented here, did as well or better. The absence of these writers pains me because I would like to share and advocate their work in this context, but 50 is finite, and means the absence of Isaac Rosenberg, William Empson, Yvor Winters, Louis MacNeice, Hart Crane, Charles Olson, Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen and others of their generation, Randall Jarrell, Patrick Kavanagh, Austin Clarke, A.D. Hope, Judith Wright, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler…

This anthology grows out of a conviction that readers can take a huge variety of pleasures from the poetry of a century in which the brutal acceleration of history, the revolutions in politics, technology, culture and society had an impact on this, the oldest verbal art known to mankind. In order to take these pleasures, certain prejudices have to be set aside and what C.H. Sisson calls a 'technique of ignorance' must be cultivated. In other words, you should approach these poems with no preconceptions and be open to the enjoyment they can bring.

The twentieth century is reflected if not recorded in the poetry included here. Poetry is, as Pound says, 'news that stays news' because new things happen, language is renewed, and that renewal remains renewing for each reader. Once the reader has set aside prejudices and prepared for pleasure and surprise, it is sensible to bear in mind that the best poems, whatever else they are, are unique. They are what with reference to Frank O'Hara's poems John Ashbery calls 'instances of themselves'. Larkin always insisted that we speak of poems rather than of poetry. It is an art of particulars, and each poem deserves separate saying and savouring.

FOR CHRISTOPHER GRAHAM LORD

Thomas Hardy

(1840–1928)

The Man He Killed

The Voice

The Convergence Of The Twain

In his own time Thomas Hardy was better known as novelist rather than poet, though he abandoned fiction and dedicated the last three decades of his life – the first three of the twentieth century – to poetry. Poetry was his first love: novels were a way of making a living, poetry a way of making sense of 'life's little ironies', and its bigger ones.

Hardy was born in Bockhampton, Dorset, in the third year of Queen Victoria's reign. His father was a builder and a musician. His mother had ambitions for her son and he received the best education his family could afford. An apprentice ecclesiastical architect from 1856–61, he specialized in the Gothic revival and developed real competence as a draftsman. From 1862–67 he worked in London at an architect's office and was awarded prizes by the Royal Institute of British Architects. The earliest of the poems he was ultimately to collect in *Wessex Poems* (1898) were written at this time. In 1870, encouraged by a friend, he began a career as a novelist with *Desperate Remedies* (1871). The impact of prose fiction on his verse is clear: he is almost always a story-teller.

'My opinion is that a poet should express the emotion of all the ages and the thought of his own.' Hardy's opinions emerge from long practice in prose and verse. 'The whole secret of living style and the difference between it and dead style, lies in it not having too much style.' Language must correspond in register to subject matter and be appropriate to occasion: a rustic plot demands plain diction; a poem on the loss of the *Titanic* ('The Convergence Of The Twain') a more sophisticated language, suited to the subject. Hardy uses metre and form to create poetic tension: some poems – 'The Man He Killed', for example – state one thing ('quaint and curious war is') but the hesitant syntax, and metrical disruption contradict what the speaker seems to be saying. Hardy uses (and discovers) a wider range of rhymed and metrical forms than any other modern English poet. His *oeuvre* amounts to almost a thousand poems.

In 1874 he married Emma Gifford, the sister-in-law of a parson whose church in Cornwall he helped to 'improve'. They were happy for a time, but passion cooled. Endurance replaced love, and more than 35 years' unhappiness elapsed before Emma died. At her death she became the faded muse of his great elegies of 1912–13. His mind was flooded by recollections; he experienced remorse and wrote love poems not at the age of 30, when he was courting, or at 34, when happily married, but in 1912, at 72 – one of life's ironies. In 1914 Hardy married a much younger woman, Florence Dugdale, who had been his literary assistant.

Sixty years old at the turn of the century, Thomas Hardy is the first poet who belongs to the twentieth century: familiar with the work of Darwin and of Einstein, he is caught between a new scientific approach and old religious verities. He is, in Donald Davie's words, 'the most far-reaching influence, for good or ill ... in British poetry of the last fifty years'. And not only British. He 'has the effect of locking any poet whom he influences into a world of historical contingency, a world of specific places at specific times.' W.H. Auden admired his 'hawk's vision, his way of looking at life from a very great height ... To see the individual life related not only to the local social life of its time, but to the whole of human history.'

The Man He Killed

'Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!

'But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him and he at me,
And killed him in his place.

'I shot him dead because –
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although

'He thought he'd 'list perhaps,
Off-hand like – just as I –
'Was out of work – had sold his traps –
No other reason why.

'Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown.'

Yes; quaint and curious war is!

The Voice

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,
Saying that now you are not as you were
When you had changed from the one who was all to me,
But as at first, when our day was fair.

Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,
Standing as when I drew near to the town
Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,
Even to the original air-blue gown!

Or is it only the breeze in its listlessness
Travelling across the wet mead to me here,
You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,
Heard no more again far or near?

Thus I; faltering forward,
Leaves around me falling,
Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,
And the woman calling.

The Convergence Of The Twain
(Lines on the loss of the 'Titanic')

I In a solitude of the sea
Deep from human vanity,
And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she.

II Steel chambers, late the pyres
Of her salamandrine fires,
Cold currents thrid, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.

III Over the mirrors meant
To glass the opulent
The sea-worm crawls—grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.

IV Jewels in joy designed
To ravish the sensuous mind
Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind.

V Dim moon-eyed fishes near
Gaze at the gilded gear
And query: 'What does this vaingloriousness down here?'...

VI Well: while was fashioning
This creature of cleaving wing,
The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything

VII Prepared a sinister mate
For her — so gaily great—
A Shape of Ice, for the time far and dissociate.

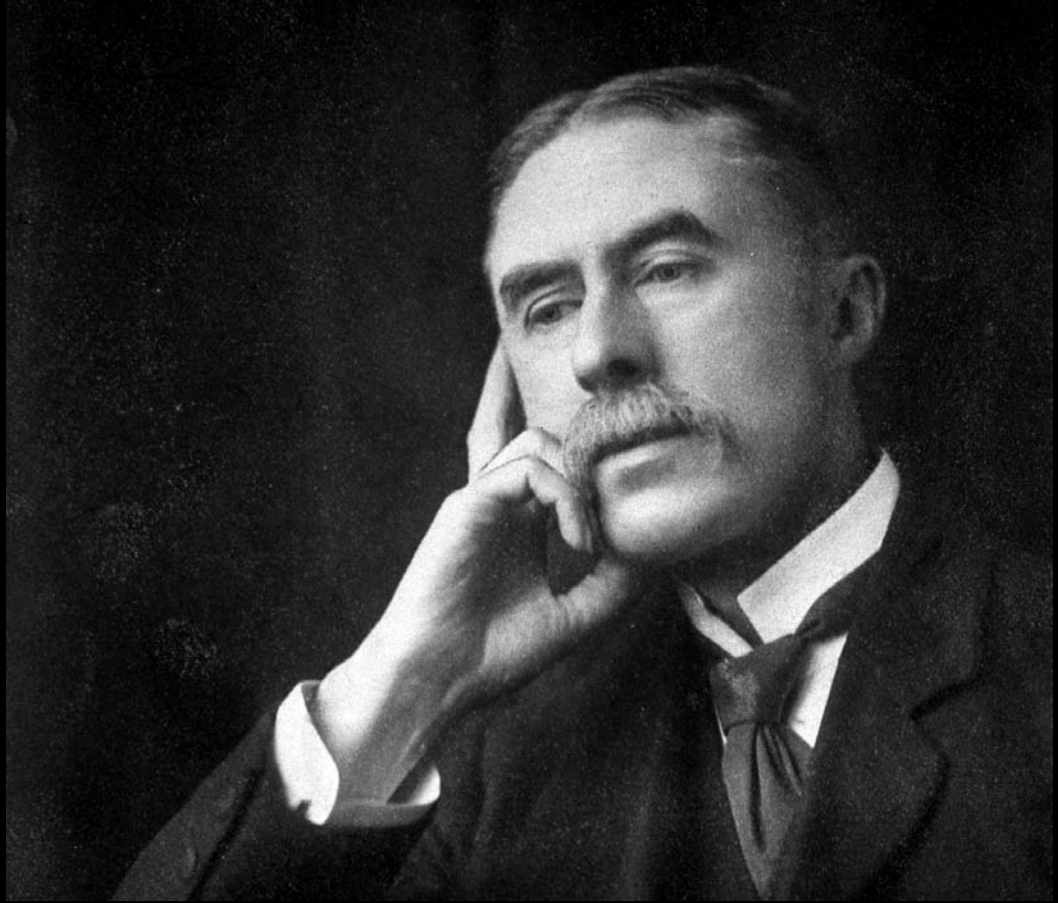
VIII And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

IX Alien they seemed to be:
No mortal eye could see
The intimate welding of their later history,

X Or sign that they were bent
By paths coincident
On being anon twin halves of one august event,

XI Till the Spinner of the Years
Said 'Now!' And each one hears,
And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.

Till the Spinner of the Years Said 'Now!'



A.E. **Housman**

(1859–1936)

Reveille

Into my heart an air that kills …

Crossing alone the nighted ferry …

On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble …

From the day in 1896 when *A Shropshire Lad* was published until now, Alfred Edward Housman has been a best-selling poet. The poems are taken to heart and learned by heart, despite the austere character of the opinionated professor, the vindictive classical scholar, the repressed man who made them. The poems speak with an uncanny, classless refinement. They sing ageless themes of mortality, thwarted love and sacrifice.

Housman touches two poetic nerves: the one that responds to popular ballads, for his poems, in strategy, theme and tone often resemble elegiac ballads; and the one that responds to hymns, though his hymn stanzas celebrate no God. The poems are memorable. Phrases and stanzas come to mind at times of stress, or simply when one is out walking. Composers including George Butterworth in 1913 and Ralph Vaughan Williams in 1914 recognized song texts in the poems and set them to music.

A.E. Housman was born in Fockbury, Worcestershire. His background was conservative, middle-class, cultured and conducive to the development of the interest in literature that was to mature into a passion for classical studies. He enjoyed escaping into the countryside for walks and the eastern horizon of these youthful rambles was Shropshire.

Educated at Bromsgrove, Worcester, and then at Oxford, he became an outstanding textual critic, so involved in his texts that he omitted to revise ancient history and philosophy and failed to take even a pass degree. He entered a Civil Service job in the Patent Office. After 11 years there his classical achievements earned him a professorial chair in Latin at University College, London, where he worked for the next decade. There he published *A Shropshire Lad*. In 1911 he became Professor of Latin at Cambridge, a post he held until the end of his life. His editions of Manilius, Juvenal and Lucan are magisterial.

A Shropshire Lad achieved for him almost immediate fame as a poet. It was 26 years before he published another collection, called simply *Last Poems*. This was followed, as 'last poems' sometimes are, by *More Poems*, a collection issued in 1936. He died later in the same year. The *Collected Poems* is slim for a poet who lived to 77 – slim in several ways. There is little variation of theme and mood, the poems do not develop in terms of form and language and can seem to parody themselves. If, as biographers suggest, he came to terms, to some troubled extent, with his homosexuality, the poems touch on this only obliquely, unless we read them as encoded expressions of a private odyssey, in which case we displace the poetry with speculative biography.

Housman expressed his public attitude to poetry most fully in a lecture, 'The Name and Nature of Poetry', delivered in 1933. He condemned the 'difficult' poetry of the metaphysicals and by implication discredited the new poetry of the twentieth century. Poetry was for him not an intellectual but a physical experience. A poem's effect had to do with music, rhyme and emotional direction, not *meaning* as such.

We cannot conveniently label his verse: the forms are classical, the content romantic; the forms are simple, the content at times sophisticated; the forms are derivative, the content, masked as it sometimes must be, feels original. He is a classical poet and a classicist of accomplishment, for whom the classics are a source of imaginative life; but he has a romantic temperament. The world to which his romanticism is confined confronts him, as it does Hardy, with teeming paradoxes, inscrutable irony.

Reveille

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

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

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

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

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

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

Up, lad, up, 'tis late for lying:
Hear the drums of morning play

Into my heart an air that kills...

Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.

Crossing alone the nighted ferry…

Crossing alone the nighted ferry
With the one coin for fee,
Whom, on the wharf of Lethe waiting,
Count you to find? Not me.

The brisk fond lackey to fetch and carry,
The true, sick-hearted slave,
Expect him not in the just city
And free land of the grave.

On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble…

On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble;
His forest fleece the Wrekin heaves;
The gale, it plies the saplings double,
And thick on Severn snow the leaves.

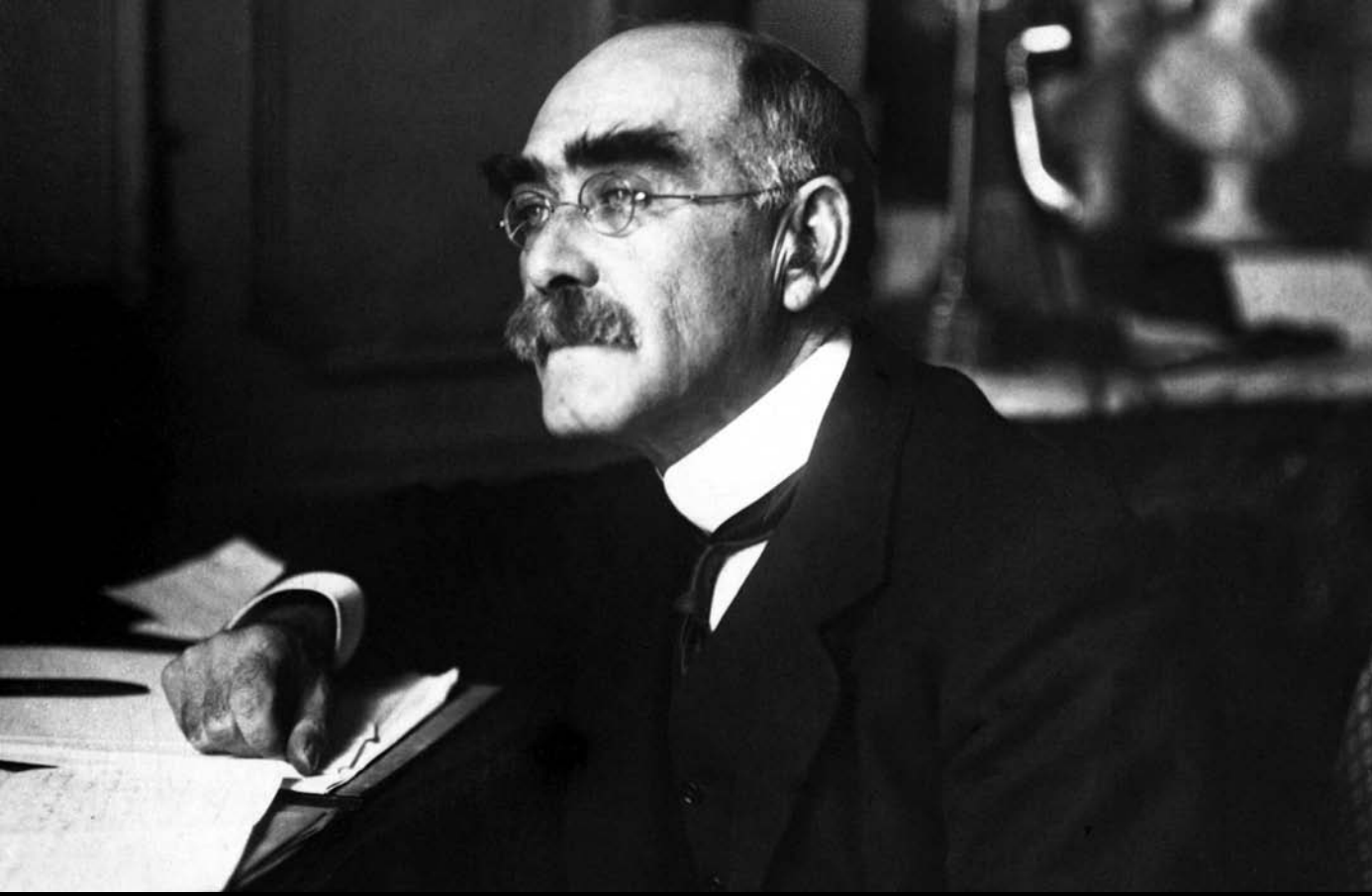
'Twould blow like this through holt and hanger
When Uricon the city stood:
'Tis the old wind in the old anger,
But then it threshed another wood.

Then, 'twas before my time, the Roman
At yonder heaving hill would stare:
The blood that warms an English yeoman,
The thoughts that hurt him, they were there.

There, like the wind through woods in riot,
Through him the gale of life blew high;
The tree of man was never quiet:
Then 'twas the Roman, now 'tis I.

The gale, it plies the saplings double,
It blows so hard, 'twill soon be gone:
To-day the Roman and his trouble
Are ashes under Uricon.

The tree of man was never quiet



Rudyard Kipling

(1865–1936)

Mesopotamia 1917

The Storm Cone

My Boy Jack

Joseph Rudyard Kipling was born in Bombay. 'Rudyard' refers to Rudyard Lake in Staffordshire where his mother and father courted. His father was a teacher of sculpture at the Bombay School of Art and later curator of the museum at Lahore. His mother was the sister of Lady Burne-Jones and of Stanley Baldwin's mother – wives, respectively, of the most famous painter of the day, and of a Prime Minister. His backgrounds were intellectually lively, socially privileged, and yet shared in different and older cultures. India in his early years was real to him as something mysterious and compelling. His imaginative world began here, and his memory. As an infant he was under the care of an Indian nurse and learned Hindustani as well as English. When as a little sahib he went to England, he stood at an awkward angle to the Colonial world; the country he came to lacked warmth, colour and easy intimacy. When he returned to India as a young man, he had changed. He invests much energy in reclaiming the original India.

He was six when he arrived in England for his education, first to the home of an elderly evangelical relation in Southsea. His miserable six years there ('the House of Desolation') were relieved by visits to the Burne-Jones establishment near Brighton. There William Morris became Uncle Topsy. Sir Edward Burne-Jones was at work on illustrations for Morris's Kelmscott Press edition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Apart from these rare outings, the boy endured a life of unhappiness, moving in 1879 to a minor public school, the United Services College, Westward Ho!, in Devon. There he began writing verse.

His first book, *Schoolboy Lyrics*, was privately printed in 1881. The next year, at 16, he returned to India and served on the staff of the Lahore *Civil and Military Gazette*. In 1889 he became foreign correspondent for the Allahabad *Pioneer* and began travelling – to China, Japan, America, Australia and Africa. As a correspondent he became a keen observer. He saw deeply into Indian – and not only Indian – affairs, with the perspective of one who understands his own British tribal priorities, but also the needs of a loved other world.

The light verse he wrote for newspapers was collected in *Departmental Ditties* (1886). But it was *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888) that made a real mark in England and paved the way for his return. He arrived in London in 1889 with a reputation. This was the period of his greatest popularity – until 1902 he was the most eloquent literary spokesman for a Tory populism which was patriotic, imperial and *responsible*.

His first major success, *Barrack Room Ballads* (1892, 1896), contains many of his best-known poems. Hymns, music-hall songs, ballads and public poetry lay behind his instantly popular verse. Such was his reputation that, after Tennyson's death, he was offered the Poet Laureateship. He refused – this was the first of several honours he declined. He declined even the Order of Merit, and when he finally came to rest at Westminster Abbey, his name was 'unenhanced'.

Kipling married the American Caroline Balestier, lived for five not pleasant years on her family estate in Vermont, and in 1897 returned to England for good, settling first at The Elms, Rottingdean, Sussex, and then in 1902 acquiring Bateman's, Burwash, from which he stirred abroad only occasionally in the last 34 years of his life. He was still a relatively young man, but he had wearied of travel. During the First World War be became an elegist. The death of his own son informs 'My Boy Jack', a poem of generalized loss.

Mesopotamia 1917

They shall not return to us, the resolute, the young,
The eager and whole-hearted whom we gave:
But the men who left them thriftily to die in their own dung,
Shall they come with years and honour to the grave?

They shall not return to us, the strong men coldly slain
In sight of help denied from day to day:
But the men who edged their agonies and chid them in their pain,
Are they too strong and wise to put away?

Our dead shall not return to us while Day and Night divide —
Never while the bars of sunset hold.
But the idle-minded overlings who quibbled while they died,
Shall they thrust for high employments as of old?

Shall we only threaten and be angry for an hour?
When the storm is ended shall we find
How softly but how swiftly they have sidled back to power
By the favour and contrivance of their kind?

Even while they soothe us, while they promise large amends,
Even while they make a show of fear,
Do they call upon their debtors, and take counsel with their friends,
To confirm and re-establish each career?

Their lives cannot repay us — their death could not undo —
The shame that they have laid upon our race.
But the slothfulness that wasted and the arrogance that slew,
Shall we leave it unabated in its place?

The Storm Cone

This is the midnight — let no star
Delude us — dawn is very far.
This is the tempest long foretold—
Slow to make head but sure to hold.

Stand by! The lull 'twixt blast and blast
Signals the storm is near, not past;
And worse than present jeopardy
May our forlorn to-morrow be.

If we have cleared the expectant reef,
Let no man look for his relief.
Only the darkness hides the shape
Of further peril to escape.

It is decreed that we abide
The weight of gale against the tide
And those huge waves the outer main
Sends in to set us back again.

They fall and whelm. We strain to hear
The pulses of her labouring gear,
Till the deep throb beneath us proves,
After each shudder and check, she moves!

She moves, with all save purpose lost,
To make her offing from the coast;
But, till she fetches open sea,
Let no man deem that he is free!

Only the darkness hides the shape
Of further peril to escape.

My Boy Jack

'Have you news of my boy Jack?'
Not this tide.
'When d'you think that he'll come back?'
Not with this wind blowing, and this tide.

'Has anyone else had word of him?'
Not this tide.
For what is sunk will hardly swim,
Not with this wind blowing and this tide.

'Oh, dear, what comfort can I find?'
None this tide,
Nor any tide,
Except he did not shame his kind—
Not even with that wind blowing, and that tide.

Then hold your head up all the more,
This tide,
And every tide;
Because he was the son you bore,
And gave to that wind blowing and that tide!