



Alliance of Literary Societies
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www.allianceofliterarysocieties.org.uk

Newsletter: Autumn/Winter 2020

Not Only, But ALSo...

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1. STRANGE DAYS INDEED...

Things have been very different in 2020. 'Unprecedented times' has become a common, almost clichéd phrase. Despite all the great work undertaken by the Walmsley Society, they could not beat a global pandemic, and sadly the ALS AGM weekend at Robin Hood's Bay was cancelled and our AGM was held online.

The ALS is adapting well to the changing times and keen to use the emerging 'new normal' as an opportunity to strive for positive change, thinking about new ways to engage and 'grow' our membership. To this end our autumn newsletter includes some significant contributions on the theme of Literary Lockdown. Whatever *your* lockdown experience, don't forget that the ALS as an umbrella organisation can offer help and support – sharing reflections, good practice and alternative ways of seeing and doing things.

I'm sure all of you have your own stories of the consequences of Covid-19. On a personal level, both the literary societies I founded and manage may be counted as Covid literary casualties. While they are in virtual intensive care I have decided to step down from active ALS business. I am happy to report that Mark Green (Trollope Society/Zola Readers) has agreed to take over the responsibility for the newsletter and I wish him all the best in his endeavours, hopeful he enjoys the experience every bit as much as I have. In leaving I can only reiterate my closing lines from my 2020 AGM report - 'the only constant in life is change'. If we acknowledge and embrace this, we will be able to face whatever 2021 throws at us.

Cally Phillips, Newsletter Editor
J.M. Barrie Society/Galloway Raiders

2. LITERARY LOCKDOWN

Some reflections from our Chair on different ways for societies to engage with their members online

The 2020 lockdown and the subsequent restrictions on face-to-face meetings have created huge problems for everyone, including charitable organisations such as ours. If societies normally use church halls, hotels, or other public venues for their meetings, they may find that a lot of these are reluctant to take bookings for the rest of this year – and some free venues like community hubs are closed either permanently or until next spring. Societies already struggle to maintain (or even increase!) their membership numbers – and engagement is an important part of that.

Many of us have been forced to use technology to maintain this engagement with our membership and, in those societies where their membership profile tends to be older, there may have been a certain reluctance to go online, on the assumption that a large percentage will not wish to join online meetings. But, your members may surprise you! I belong to the Arts Society Birmingham (with over 400 members, mostly well into retirement). For their first online lecture (in June), they used the basic pay-for Zoom host, thinking that they would not get anywhere near the 100 maximum attendance. They were wrong, and had to run two sessions. So, now they have the ‘super’ pay-for Zoom which allows them 500 attendees!

Zoom

This is definitely the most popular online meeting forum, and, to my mind, the easiest to use (as long as you have a decent internet connection). Many book and play/poetry reading groups have taken to this over the summer, allowing them to continue to meet, but in a safe environment. The free version allows you up to 100 attendees and gives you 40 minutes. Speakers can share their screen (i.e. if they want to give a powerpoint style presentation), and you can also record it if necessary (although it has to be with everyone’s permission). Recording can be useful for committee meetings where you need to write up minutes – but you wouldn’t want to keep the recording as they can be big files!

If you want more than 40 minutes, you need one of the paid-for versions. The basic one costs about £15 per month (for the person hosting) – which could well be much less than the cost of your usual room hire! When you create a meeting on Zoom, you will get an attendee log-in code (called ‘Membership ID’) and you can set a password. You can also create a waiting room, so you only let in to the meeting those people you are expecting to join. The waiting room facility is particularly important if you have asked people to book in advance (and perhaps imposed a small fee if you are having to pay a speaker). Small groups can engage in discussion; and larger groups can use the scrolling ‘chat’ facility.

The Sherlock Holmes Society has run two Zoom experiences during lockdown. One was a virtual walking tour of Holmes’ London (using shared screen images) – so popular that they had to run it twice! And the other was ‘A three-minute problem’ with designated members presenting unresolved problems from the Holmes stories. The latter was a truly international audience (the Americas, Japan, and Europe), which could not have been done face-to-face.

Skype

Skype works in much the same way as Zoom. However, there are no sign ups, no downloads, and no time limits. You can only have up to 50 attendees though. It is easy to use, you can share screen for presentations, and, if you want to record it, they will store it for up to 30 days (which, in some respects is better than Zoom where recordings are stored either on your computer or in

the cloud – and, as already said, the files can be big). So, if your numbers are small, you might want to try this.

YouTube

If you have the technological know-how, you can create speaker videos and upload these to YouTube. This might be useful if you have regular talks and a membership of over 100. There are lots of simple guides online which will take you through the process of creating a YouTube Channel if you want to keep the videos in one place. Then, members can access the videos either via their computer/mobile device or by smart TV. There are pros and cons for this. Pros: extra publicity for your society if you make the video open to all, ability to limit viewing to just your members, and accessibility. Cons: no live chat/comment facility as there is on Zoom and no engagement with other attendees.

Instead of holding its annual festival this year (taking over the village of Helpston), the John Clare Society uploaded the Presidential Address to YouTube. So, at least members could have the opportunity to see that. If you want live chat, there is also something called YouTube Live – where you can host a webinar for free. Again, there are online guides for this but it might require more setting up than Zoom (e.g. you need to set up a channel as above)! Another group I belong to is holding their annual conference online using a variety of venues over the period of a week: Facebook, YouTube, Zoom, etc. The advantage of this is that people who don't like Facebook, for example, may engage with Zoom or YouTube. So, it can widen participation.

Facebook

Facebook allows you to set up groups, and a lot of societies have these. They can either be open to all or closed groups (so people apply to join). These can be an easy and quick way to engage with members and potential members. They can be used for general (non real-time) discussion, and information sharing (new publications, online events, etc.).

WhatsApp Messenger

WhatsApp can be used on most smart phones. It can also be used on a computer by downloading WhatsApp Desktop (as long as the computer system isn't too old). My experience of it is using it on a smart phone as a chat facility, and it has really kept our group alive during lockdown. In fact, we have all become closer, and invitations to socially distanced tea-in-the-garden events are starting to emerge as restrictions reduce. You post and respond to messages in much the same way as on email – and you can attach images and video. It's really good for group discussion and caters for those who don't necessarily want the time commitment of live chat.

To sum up

I am sure that we will all emerge from this crisis with a greater knowledge of how to use technology to our advantage. We might even adopt some practices more permanently as a way of including those members who might be unable to travel to events (particularly if some members are based overseas) – and also to reduce meeting costs.

This is just a brief look at what is out there to help us. There is a lot more. If you want any further advice, do contact us and we will try to assist.

Linda J. Curry
ALS Chair/ John Clare Society

3. TWEETING FOR DR JOHNSON

In late February four members of the Johnson Society Council met over a pint in the Angel in Lichfield's Market Street to discuss how to widen the appeal of our society via digital media. It was agreed to open a Twitter account. Our tweeter-in-chief works in communication, with a great deal of experience in social media, so she set up our account and has become its administrator. I barely knew what a tweet was and certainly did not know how to write one. Our tweeter-in-chief did not have a great deal of time to devote to posting, and we agreed that the worst thing would be to start an account which was not used, so all four of us agreed to contribute. I approached the project, not only with ignorance, but with scepticism, as the whole idea of likes and re-tweeting seemed foreign. I had (still have, to be honest) a vision of re-tweets rebounding around the universe, unread, unnoticed and unloved. What was the point?

And was it appropriate to reduce the many complexities of Samuel Johnson to 280 characters?

Our first post appeared appropriately on 2 March, which is the patronal feast of St Chad of Lichfield, and the day that Garrick and Johnson set out to seek their fortunes in London. It is considered a propitious day to start new projects in Lichfield, but it seemed it was not for us: we began just at the time that everything came to a grinding halt due to coronavirus. Our society was able to hold our annual lecture on 2 March (Emily Ireson on 18th century clothing), which deserved a tweet, and on the 16 March, we planted an offspring of Johnson's Willow at the National Arboretum (tweets with photos). After that our tweets were of cancellations and closures (our AGM and the closure of the Birthplace Museum, announced on 18 March).

Meanwhile, I was studying YouTube tutorials about Twitter, asking advice, and generally hesitating until another member of our team said, 'Come on in, the water's fine.' Others sensibly tweet when they feel like it or have something to say, but being something of a plodder, I decided to tweet once a week on Wednesdays. It has been interesting learning what appeals and what does not. Quotes alone do not attract much attention; a quote with a comment or an image gets a much better response. Near the anniversary of the meeting of Johnson and Boswell, the Birthplace Museum posted a Rowlandson cartoon of Johnson and Boswell waltzing down Princes Street in Edinburgh, arm in arm, with the famous quote, 'A man, Sir, should keep his friendship in constant repair' (in the Rowlandson cartoon, Johnson, hilariously, is actually saying to Boswell, 'I can smell you in the dark'). This received 50 likes, 27 re-tweets and two comments. However, the record so far by a mile has been a re-tweet from Rajan Naidu during the Black Lives Matter protests, about Johnson's black servant, heir and friend Francis Barber, and his living descendant, Cedric Barber. This garnered 284 likes, 74 re-tweets and 14 comments.

We have secret weapons in the form of past presidents, who include Henry Hitchings and Susie Dent, who are prolific tweeters, and get our posts to a wider audience. Gyles Brandreth, who is president of the Oscar Wilde Society and also a keen Johnsonian, offered to follow us and re-tweet to his very large number of followers.

So, how have I done personally with my tweets? So-so, all in all. I received a slap on the wrist for tweeting Johnson's Dictionary definition of 'arrogance' ('taking much upon oneself') without comment during the Dominic Cummings affair, which was considered too political. I have to agree: this is not my personal platform after all, but the Johnson Society's, and we do not want to alienate people. My greatest success so far has come with this:

Apropos of lockdown life, a favourite word of Johnson's (according to Bate) was 'bustle', denoting pointless activity designed to 'fill up the vacuities of life'. He compared it to 'getting on horseback in a ship'. So here we are, cantering over the waves.

The response to that was 30 likes, 10 re-tweets and one comment. To my surprise, I have found the discipline of sending these snippets out into the world challenging and great fun. It is a bit like writing haiku.

We now have 190 followers. This is small beer compared to Donald Trump's 30.8 million, but ours are nicer people. It would be lovely if I could come up every week with a profound or funny Johnsonian saying, but I have not so far succeeded. However, we have been attracting comment from a widening circle of people all over the world. Some might become members of the Johnson Society, but ultimately, that really isn't the point. The main objective of our society is to increase knowledge of the life and writing of Johnson, and we are certainly achieving that in a small, but purposeful way.

Please check us out: @SamJohnsonSoc. And please do let us know what you think.

Marty Ross
ALS Secretary / Johnson Society (Lichfield)

If your society would like advice on setting up a Twitter account, please contact our social media officer Jodie Roberts: geraniumcat@gmail.com

4. ZOLA READERS: a virtual literary society since 2017

The lockdown precipitated by the pandemic crisis had no impact on the running of the Zola Readers group. We have been a virtual literary society, operating exclusively online, since our inception in May 2017.

We were approaching the end of reading together *The Ladies' Paradise*, the eighth book in Zola's great cycle of twenty Rougon-Macquart novels. We were already planning to start reading together the ninth book, *The Sin of Abbe Mouret*, from the beginning of May.

Nothing changed and we went ahead with our plan, reading together through May and June. The group exists as a private Facebook group. We set up the group after finding a number of like-minded people on various Facebook groups devoted to 19th century and other literature. We invited friends who might be interested to join.

Since our inception, anyone on Facebook can see our public facing page and, if they wish to join, can apply to do so through that page. All potential new members are considered by the group's administrators (me and a couple of other members) and admitted if we are satisfied that they are bona fide people, interested in literature, and not 'trolls'.

We have a Facebook page for the group where members chat about anything and everything related to Zola. We share articles from online editions of newspapers and magazines through this forum. We also share news of any Zola related events that we discover – such as radio or TV broadcasts about Zola or dramatisations of his works.

Most of our activity is focused, however, on reading his novels together. This is done by setting up Facebook events in which we agree a reading schedule – usually a chapter every two or three days, depending on length – and which of us will lead the discussion on each chapter. The ‘leader’ for each chapter will usually post their comments about the chapter on the Facebook event. Others can then join in the conversation, replying to that chapter’s opening post. The discussions can go off on tangents, involve heated (though always good-natured) debate about the meanings of Zola’s prose, and sometimes reveal absurdities in the translations when compared with the original French. We have bilingual readers based in France who can ‘arbitrate’ such discussions. (For what it is worth, our collective view is that the 19th century translations by Vizitelly are better avoided – the bowdlerisation of his editions leads to some ‘continuity errors’ that render the text somewhat difficult to follow at times.)

As a virtual group, our membership is not constrained by the need to be able to attend meetings. We have members in the UK, in the USA, in France (of course), and as far afield as Australia and China. And if we miss out on the opportunity to drink a bottle of wine together at a round table discussion, we gain the delight of waking up to find that since you went to bed, someone has ‘liked’ your comment and replied with a new insight of their own which enhances your understanding and enjoyment of the book.

Mark Green

Administrator/Member of Zola Readers

5. POSITIVE STEPS: Literary Lockdown on the Isle of Wight

My wife and I are lucky to live a few minutes from the sea in Freshwater on the Isle of Wight. As well as being near the sea we are close to Tennyson Down, named after the poet who lived for 39 years at the nearby Farringford House with his wife, Emily, until his death in 1892. A 30 minute walk takes us up to the Tennyson Monument, which appears in (and disappears from) view on the slightly undulating ascent. Close by is a toposcope which shows distances to places far and near with the opening words of Tennyson's last poem ‘Crossing the Bar’, reputedly written whilst crossing the Solent, around its four sides.



Formerly called ‘High Down’, this was a retreat for Tennyson as he escaped from those who hoped to catch sight of him as if he were a Victorian pop star. He also had many literary visitors including Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, Charles Kingsley, Coventry Patmore, Swinburne, Edward Fitzgerald and Longfellow. Many artists also visited, and the Tennysons were close friends with Julia Margaret Cameron, the eminent photographer who lived nearby at Dimbola Lodge. Both homes are generally open to the public. In 1935 Virginia Woolf completed *Freshwater*, an absurdist drama based on the life of her great-aunt, Julia Margaret Cameron. Featuring such other eminences such as Tennyson, and the painter George Frederick Watts, this riotous play satirizes high-minded Victorian notions of art. Although he didn't visit Tennyson himself,

William Hale White (also known as Mark Rutherford) visited Freshwater once whilst staying on the island. In a letter to his friend, Mrs Sarah Colenutt he wrote, *'I have thought more about Tennyson's death than I should like to say or could say.'*

In 1902 he visited Freshwater for a short visit but wrote that *'It was too far from Ryde, but every place near the Solent was crowded.'* (White's sentiment is felt on the island to this day – the east and west side are far apart.) He was hoping to visit Louisa Tennyson with whom he had corresponded at Freshwater, but she had moved. They had corresponded about the letters and papers he possessed which related to the Wordsworth and Coleridge families. *'She was the second wife of our Lord Tennyson's brother Arthur. I tried to find her in Freshwater, but found she had left and was living at Cranleigh.'*

During lockdown, I decided to re-read all the Mark Rutherford novels from *The Autobiography* and *The Deliverance* to the final *Clara Hopgood*, visiting *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane*, *Miriam's Schooling* and *Catherine Furze* on the way. When one loves a writer each re-reading enables one to see more and more and with *Catherine Furze*, for example, I had Vince Newey's article 'Mark Rutherford's Salvation and the Case of *Catharine Furze*', in *Mortal Pages, Literary Lives: Studies in Nineteenth-Century Autobiography* (ed. Vincent Newey and Philip Shaw, 1996) to enhance my enjoyment. Sadly, Professor Vincent Newey died on the 16th of May this year, following a stroke. He was a founder member of the Mark Rutherford Society as well as being an authority on poetry of the pre-Romantic and Romantic periods (Cowper, Gray, and Goldsmith, as well as Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, and Byron) and the work of several nineteenth-century novelists (Eliot, Dickens, Hardy, and Mark Rutherford). He published two important monographs – *Cowper's Poetry: A Critical Study and Reassessment* (1982), and *The Scriptures of Charles Dickens: Novels of Ideology, Novels of the Self* (2004).

As well as re-reading my favourite author, I have had to try and keep up with our Nineteenth Century Book Group reading and so since lockdown have read most of *Shirley* by Charlotte Brontë, *Esther Waters* by George Moore and most recently, *The Coral Island* by R.M. Ballantyne. We are now on George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, which brings me back to Mark Rutherford, by way of an essay about him by Claire Tomalin called 'Maggie Tulliver's Little Sisters'. He worked with George Eliot in John Chapman's office at 142 The Strand.

Claire Tomalin has always felt that Rutherford is not well enough known and wrote afterwords to three of his novels when reprinted by the Hogarth Press in 1984 and 1985. I was very pleased to receive a postcard from her last year in which she thanked me for *'keeping up the good work of remembering Hale White and celebrating his work – he was such a good writer and should be remembered.'* Of course, I don't do this on my own and significant contributions to keeping Mark Rutherford 'alive' come from our Chair Mark Crees, who is always writing about Rutherford, and Bob Owens, who organised a symposium titled 'Literature and "The Woman Question"' in 2018, which was predominantly about Mark Rutherford, the proceedings of which are to be published in August.

Nick Wilde
Secretary, Mark Rutherford Society



6. DREAMTIME : An Account of Lockdown Reading

In the first week of March, while I was in St Andrews for the StAnza International Poetry Festival, certain suspicious symptoms began to creep into me. By the time I left the festival six days later, I was pretty sure that these were not the ordinary symptoms of winter colds or flu: I was felled. I went to bed. I phoned my medical practice, but the outcome wasn't helpful. The practice had shut its doors and the doctor was convinced that it couldn't be Covid and that, whatever it was, it could have nothing to do with the festival. He did not think the festival audience would have to be warned. No testing was available.

The dreamtime started. I struggled with an illness which, if it wasn't Covid-19, certainly caused bronchitis, pneumonia, physical collapse, and ultimately a flamingly painful form of pleurisy from which I have not yet fully recovered.

What to read in days like these, when the fatigue, pain, anger, exhaustion, muddle-headedness, malaise and apathy are all telling you that reading is too difficult and irritating? When the lives presented to you in many novels seem self-centred or trivial? When the author's language strikes you as being over-decorative and inauthentic? Or when poetry is either too sentimental or too self-consciously clever? Or when even the most wonderful poems are being used in a transactional manner?

Usually, I make it a rule to finish all books that I begin. During my dreamtime, however, I had no patience with anything that didn't suit my own dreaming. Even the literary translation I normally tackle with joy and gusto seemed to drag me down; and all the books borrowed from the library have languished unread in a pile by the sofa, since nothing in them convinced me that they were worth the trouble. Those books are now in self-isolation with me, since the libraries have also shut their doors.

What initially kept me going as a reader was reading poems in Dutch, my second language, by a 20th century poet and writer whose work I already knew, but which I had never properly explored. Jan Slauerhoff (1898-1936) studied medicine during the flu pandemic of 1918-1920 and became both a ship's doctor and a writer. He died of tuberculosis at the age of 38, having long ignored the signs of his illness – by 1932 he certainly knew that he was probably suffering from the disease.

Slauerhoff's travels provided him with much of the subject-matter of his work, although he had been obsessed with the sea and with far-distant cultures even before his voyages. Two of his novels have been translated into English: *Het verboden rijk / The Forbidden Kingdom* (translated by Paul Vincent; London: Pushkin, 2012) and *Het leven op aarde / Adrift in the Middle Kingdom* (translated by David McKay; Bath: Handheld Press, 2019). I can recommend both. They are unusual modernist novels that interweave past and present in a disorientating, often dreamlike, fashion, and their settings reflect Slauerhoff's attraction to both Portugal and the Far East, particularly China. The second novel has been described by Simon Lavery as: 'a modernist European alienation narrative' which 'comes to its hallucinatory, mystical conclusion in a kind of Chinese-Elysian poppy-field of earthly-heavenly delights'.

I decided not to re-read these two novels, however, but instead to explore Slauerhoff's poems, in particular those that related to China. By exploring, I mean the kind of in-depth reading that for me comes with translation. I found myself embarking on the peculiar experiment of translating a Slauerhoff version of an Arthur Waley translation of a poem by the Chinese Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi (transliterated by Waley as Po Chu-i) – i.e. translating at a third remove. I came to the serious but slightly mad conclusion that translating all of Slauerhoff's translations of

translations from the Chinese would be a worthwhile and excellent project. I imagined that my work would tell the English reader something about Slauerhoff's vision of China. And perhaps it would, yet although Covid gave me the dream and the ambition, it did not miraculously confer the command of Chinese that this project would need, nor the range of scholarship required.

The Chinese theme continued in a less strenuous fashion with the re-reading of the beautiful, simply-written little book *The Silent Traveller in Lakeland* by the Chinese author, artist and poet Chiang Yee (1903-1977), who lived and worked in England from 1933 to 1955. Last year he was honoured in Oxford with a blue plaque commemorating his contribution to British life as an artist, writer, academic and unofficial cultural ambassador for China. He qualified for a plaque because he had lived in the same lodgings for fifteen years, from 1940 to 1955. Oxford gave him a place of refuge after his Hampstead flat was bombed and destroyed in the Blitz.

Reading *The Silent Traveller in Lakeland* (originally published in 1937) gave me a place of refuge and a space where I could freely wander. Although I couldn't walk far – or far from home – I rambled in my imagination with Chiang Yee. I empathized with his joys and disappointments (rain; insensitive tourist guides; Windermere being as busy as Piccadilly Circus) and in particular with the steady comfort and friendship he gained from nature.

One of the most telling sections of the book is Chiang's account of his attempt at moon-viewing. He was delighted to hear that the moon would be visible on the night of 7 August 1936. The weather was clear and the moon was still close to full, but on the wane. The moon had a special place in Chiang's heart because he associated 'her' with the mother he had lost as a boy of five. I was, of course, struck by the similarity of his life in this respect with that of Norman Nicholson – the Cumbrian poet and writer whose work and vision the Norman Nicholson Society strives to keep alive. Nicholson had also lost his mother at the age of five, and developed a similar feeling of deep interconnection with nature.

Chiang Yee's joy is increased because he can hire a rowing boat, which gives him the possibility of contemplating the moon shining over Derwentwater. In Britain, and especially in London, he has almost never had the opportunity to see her in all her clear beauty as he could do at home in China, where the climate was dryer. Chiang is disappointed in his aesthetic and spiritual quest: after all his excited anticipation the moon fails to appear; yet his sadness at not seeing his 'long-departed friend' is transformed that night by a dream in which he sees her shining over a pine forest on Lu Mountain, his home-place and one of the most important cultural and spiritual centres of China. This dream is lovelier to him than any reality: in dreams we can 'face the moon herself like kings and queens, free from shyness' (*The Silent Traveller in Lakeland*, p. 48). It is the word 'shyness' here that I find so affecting.

The passage in which he describes his rowing across the lake with a chance friend is really enchanting (and has echoes of Wordsworth, especially when it seems to Chiang that the mountains are moving):

It was not dark yet. I gazed on the mirror-like surface of the water and listened to the sound of the oars striking it steadily and rhythmically—Tsan, tze-tze-tze; tsan, tze-tze-tze... Once I felt I was ski-ing backwards on ice, and then I imagined the boat with its oars stretched out to both sides was like a dragonfly perching and skimming along the water surface. The mountains on both sides were apparently moving along as well, but showing their friendship to us as if they were coming out to welcome us one after the other.

(Chiang Yee, *The Silent Traveller in Lakeland*, Mercat Press, 2004, p. 47)

Where Wordsworth felt fear and guilt at seeing a peak rear up its head like a living thing, Chiang Yee perceives a familiarity and friendliness in nature that sustains him in a foreign country and helps him to imagine himself back amongst the mountains and waters of home: 'Nature has never changed to me in moving from place to place; she differs only according to my changing state of mind' (p. 44); and later:

The rocks were beautifully arranged one upon another, and there were a few tiny houses built under a huge crag, which was dressed all in green and showed me again how similar Nature is everywhere. I do not know why people should always be pointing out the differences. (pp. 44-5)

These words are simple, but not trite, and are of a piece with Chiang Yee's thinking about humanity (why are we always pointing out the differences?). He is able to wrap up profound thinking in beguiling, almost child-like thoughts, such as in his conversation with the fish of Derwentwater. He discusses with them whether they – the inhabitants of two-thirds of the surface of the world – have the same violent enmities amongst themselves as humans do:

'Do you have the same feelings of difference in race, in nationality, in language, or in the terms "Culture and Civilisation"? Have you ever planned to group together for Collective Destruction or Collective Security?' I paused, naturally without an answer; the fish took no notice, but went on swimming as usual. (p. 43)

Reading this book again was like drinking cool, clear water; or like bathing my eyes and seeing the world afresh. As I read it, I relived my own travels, not only in Lakeland, but in China too, and I felt, like Chiang, the need for mutual respect, for peace and harmony, and the refreshment to the spirit that art, poetry and good writing provide. These are important at all times, but especially now, in times of suffering and fear.

For Chiang, the suffering was caused by homesickness and worries about his family in China, caught up first in the civil war and then in the Sino-Japanese war; he was also concerned about what was happening in Europe, in Spain in particular, and sensed the looming approach of worldwide conflict. In a coda to the book, the text of a talk delivered to the Fell and Rock Climbing Club, he admits that his 'dream of his beloved English Lakeland', which merges with his vision of his own lakes and mountains, has been shattered by 'noises of aeroplanes and bursting bombs' (p. 80). These are the planes of nightmare, bombing his motherland, where his brother was killed in the early stages of the Sino-Japanese war. Sadly, the aeroplanes and bombs would soon be affecting Cumbria too, as Nicholson's wartime poems make clear – and as can be seen even now in the low-flying practice of RAF fighter planes across the Lake District.

Chiang's vision of Lakeland – and, in particular, his philosophical, artistic and spiritual reflections – took me out of my Covid doze and made me review the ridges, peaks and valleys of my own life, placing them in the context of the complete landscape.

I hope I have aroused your curiosity, not only with regard to *The Silent Traveller in Lakeland*, but for the life and work of Chiang Yee more generally. There is an excellent article written by Anna Wu, Assistant Curator at the V&A, on Chiang Yee in Britain. It can easily be found online. In times when it seems easy to demonize China for the origins of this virus, it is really refreshing to look at ourselves through Chinese eyes, and to find parallels between Chiang's period and our own.

Antoinette Fawcett
The Norman Nicholson Society

7. SOCIETY MATTERS

a. WILFRED OWEN ASSOCIATION

The Wilfred Owen Association, which exists to promote the memory of Wilfred Owen, the First World War poet, and to celebrate his life and poetry, is looking for a new Chair, and two additional Trustees. Details are being advertised at <https://trustees-unlimited.co.uk/roles/the-wilfred-owen-association-chair-and-two-trustee-committee-members/>

If you, or anyone you know, would be interested in taking on any of these roles, please do go to this website and follow the directions given there by downloading the 'Supporting documents' to apply for the relevant position, or encourage others to do so. The Wilfred Owen Association will be interested in hearing from anyone who is willing to contribute to its work and is suitably placed to do so.

b. THE DYMOCK POETS BOOK COLLECTION at Ledbury Library

In 2018 Linda Hart donated 250 books by and about the Dymock Poets to Herefordshire Libraries. Here she tells about her involvement with the Dymock Poets and why she donated her collection to Herefordshire Libraries. Linda joined the Ledbury Civic Society as a life member as soon as she moved to Ledbury in May 1993. She was a founder and the first chairman of the Friends of the Dymock Poets. For many years she lectured on the Dymock Poets at venues throughout the three counties.

(This article was originally published in The Ledbury Letter, an email newsletter published by the Ledbury Civic Society in March 2020, and we thank Linda for sharing it with us here. If you have similar articles you'd like to give another life to, please email the newsletter editor.)

I realised in 2017 that it was time for me to downsize. My main concern was the future of my collection of books on the Dymock Poets. They were all in one large bookcase: volumes of poetry, biography, letters and literary criticism on Edward Thomas, Rupert Brooke, Wilfrid Gibson, John Drinkwater, Lascelles Abercrombie and Robert Frost.

These six poets were all living in or visiting Dymock – on the Gloucestershire-Herefordshire border -- between the years 1911 and 1915.

There are 37 books by or about Rupert Brooke, 42 books by or about Edward Thomas, and 75 books by or about Robert Frost. This comes to 160 books, which is about 60 percent of the total. The other 40 percent is about the Dymock Poets as a group, the Georgian Poets and other writers of the period, the Gloucestershire countryside, and books that don't fall into any category such as a 1960s history about Dymock by its then vicar, Canon J.E. Gethyn-Jones MBE.

The 75 books by and about Robert Frost probably make this the biggest and best publicly available collection on him in the UK; many of them were published in the US and even with the internet are hard to obtain today.

The biographies in the collection are mainly about Frost, Thomas, and Brooke – some of them unusual or rare. For example: the Brooke biographies include a 1948 one published in Indianapolis, a 1974 one published in Amsterdam, and a 1978 one published in Toronto that focuses on his visit to Canada. There are many volumes of letters by Frost, Thomas and Brooke.

The books of literary criticism are also mainly about Frost, Thomas and Brooke – some written by one literary critic, while some are books of essays by several writers.

Some of the Dymock Poets also wrote prose and plays and some edited anthologies. All of these are in the collection. There is even some fiction – a novel based on the life of Robert Frost and two novels based on the life of Rupert Brooke.

There are pristine copies of the four issues of *New Numbers*, a 1914 poetry magazine edited at Abercrombie's cottage, printed in Gloucester and posted to subscribers from Dymock's post office. This venture in self-publishing by Abercrombie, Gibson, Brooke and Drinkwater meant they could publish their own work without submitting it for approval to book and magazine editors. One of the most famous sonnets in the English language, Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier' ('If I should die, think only this of me...'), was written specifically for the final issue of *New Numbers* and appeared only two months before his death.

How did I come to have all these books? Some of the Frost books in the collection have belonged to me since my high school days, when I was growing up in New York City. They came to England when I moved here permanently in 1975. Some of the Rupert Brooke and Edward Thomas books were purchased between 1975 and 1993, when I was living in Oxfordshire and London.

But the majority of books in the collection were purchased after 1993, when I became chairman of the newly formed Friends of the Dymock Poets. I soon realised that there wasn't a book which contained all the poems that the six poets had written while they were in Dymock, including, of course, poems that were about Dymock, its countryside, and their friendships with one another. I decided to find all these 'Dymock poems' and publish them in an anthology, with notes about each poem. This required lots of research and that meant lots of books. The result was *Once I Lived in Gloucestershire: A Dymock Poets Anthology*, published in 1995.

Where did I buy the books? At first, mainly from Keith Smith Books in Ledbury. As soon as the Friends of the Dymock Poets was formed, I asked Keith to obtain books on the Dymock Poets and related subjects, which he could sell at our conferences. I also went to second-hand book shops and charity shops whenever I was away from home and almost always came back with something.

Away from home could mean quite far away. Twice a year I was in New York City to visit my father – a great opportunity to hunt down books, especially Frost ones, at The Strand Bookstore (its logo says '18 miles of books'). In later years, I did more buying online when I realised the collection didn't have something I deemed important.

Some books were gifts from friends, from my father, from acquaintances, and occasionally strangers. After hearing my lecture on the Dymock Poets, a woman in the audience told me about her 1936 edition of Brooke's *Collected Poems*; it was her school prize, and had been beautifully bound. She had treasured it for 60 years and that evening she gave it to me for safe keeping.

Some of the pages in some of the books have been written in – by me. Yes, I know, sacrilege. But I am a writer, researcher and lecturer. Books are the tools of my trade. Tools are there to be used. I occasionally underline sentences, put ticks beside important paragraphs, highlight words, make comments in the margins and write notes on blank pages at the back. And I correct typos. This is embarrassing, now that the public can look inside all the books. I thought of erasing my

various marks, but I haven't erased anything. The librarians are hoping that readers will not do what I have done.

Before deciding where to donate the books, I thought about some criteria. I wanted the books to be housed as near to Dymock as possible; easily accessible to the general public; stored safely and securely, with conservation work carried out when necessary. I wanted the collection catalogued and available online. Finally, I hoped that the collection would be publicized and promoted. Herefordshire Library Services met all of those conditions, and the enthusiasm of senior librarian Jan Nesaratnam has been a bonus.

The books have now been catalogued and are permanently housed in a specially designed bookcase at Ledbury Library. The collection is located in the old pantry of this restored medieval building. The books can be read in this room, or anywhere else on the premises.

Linda Hart
Dymock Poets

At the time of this newsletter, Ledbury Library (like most) is closed/ operating a click and collect service. You can find online information about the Dymock Poets Collection under "Special Collections" or "The Master's House".

https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/info/200149/libraries/650/the_masters_house/4 All the titles in the collection are listed on the Herefordshire Libraries online catalogue. In the search box type the phrase "Dymock Poets" to see the full list.

For information about the Dymock Poets and the Friends of the Dymock Poets, the website is at www.dymockpoets.org.uk

c. THE JAMES HILTON SOCIETY AT 20

The James Hilton Society was established in 2000 to promote and encourage an interest in the considerable achievements of the novelist and screenwriter James Hilton (1900-1954), whose centenary coincided with the new century. The Society takes much satisfaction in the fact that it has made considerable progress in a relatively short existence. Sadly its founder, Dr John Hammond, passed away two years ago; without his enthusiasm and commitment the Society would not have come into existence. He was of course a literary society tour-de-force, having also established the H.G. Wells Society and promoted a continued interest in the works of the previously rather forgotten Warwick Deeping. John, I know, would be pleased that his commitment to promoting the work of James Hilton lives on though his loss stays with us. It is sad that we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Society's founding without him.

The Society's aim has been to remind the world of the significance of the works of James Hilton. He wrote many novels and at least three of them have become classics – *Lost Horizon*, *Goodbye Mr Chips* and *Random Harvest*. Film enthusiasts will also know that all three became legendary motion pictures. Clive Bloom, in his book *Bestsellers*, wrote of Hilton: 'his work contained mass appeal but also won critical praise and awards.' Through his fiction Hilton brought into the world names which have been immortalised – 'Mr Chips' and 'Shangri-La'. Mr Chips, of course, was the central figure in the story *Goodbye Mr Chips*, but the term is now used to describe someone whose career has taken the form of a lengthy, selfless devotion to an institution. 'Shangri-La', the location of *Lost Horizon*, has become a word that expresses a type of paradise

and so has been used as a name for a range of places and institutions ranging from luxury hotels to retirement bungalows. While the film versions of the most famous Hilton novels were not scripted by him he did find another form of literary success as a screenwriter. He wrote screenplays for great directors like Alfred Hitchcock (*Foreign Correspondent*) and George Cukor (*Camille*) and won an Oscar in 1942 for his contribution to the screenplay of the influential wartime box-office success *Mrs Miniver*. He was an active public figure in Hollywood, becoming Vice-President of the Screenwriters' Guild; he also provided the narration for a number of films including *Madame Curie* and hosted a popular American radio series, Hallmark Playhouse.

The Society is supervised by a small committee and its activities centre on two major annual events; a spring meeting in May and the Annual General Meeting in September. The spring meeting usually takes place in the Lancashire town of Leigh, where Hilton was born, and the Annual General Meeting is always at the Leys School in Cambridge which is both the school Hilton attended and also the setting for *Goodbye Mr Chips*. The main focus of each of the meetings is a talk on a theme relating to the works of James Hilton. In recent times the Society is pleased to have developed a link with Sir George Monoux College in Walthamstow, the school Hilton attended prior to the Leys. The spring meeting has frequently taken place in Walthamstow.

The Society produces two publications: the newsletter which appears three times a year and the rather weightier *Hiltonian*, a journal which features quite lengthy and well-researched studies of topics relevant to the life and work of the writer; this appears once every two years. There is a website where details of membership can be found: www.jameshiltonsociety.co.uk. As with all such societies, while the membership remains robust it would be pleasing to have more enthusiasts in our midst. We continue to be pleased with the response to the work we do and are particularly encouraged by the interest generated overseas. The intention is to hold a celebratory lunch at the time of our AGM this year.

Richard Hughes
Chairman, James Hilton Society

8. LAST BUT NOT LEAST

Hope springs eternal: An invitation to ALS AGM 2021

Usually in the autumn newsletter we provide a report of the AGM. Since it was held virtually, online, you can catch up with the reports yourself on the website: <https://allianceofliterarysocieties.wordpress.com/2020-in-robin-hoods-bay-with-the-walmsley-society/>

We hope and trust that the coronavirus will be under sufficient control to allow the 2021 AGM to go ahead in person. The Hopkins Society and the Betjeman Society jointly invite you to the weekend of 21-23 May. Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Betjeman? Don't they sound like poetry's Odd Couple? Indeed – that will be the theme of the Saturday morning presentation. Despite the obvious differences, there are surprising overlaps, such as their education at Highgate School (50 years apart, of course).

The venue will be Highgate in North London, full of literary associations. After the morning, lunch and the AGM, there will be four afternoon options to choose from:

1) A guided walk round the sites and memorials of Highgate's other literary figures: Andrew Marvell, S.T. Coleridge, Christina Rossetti, A.E. Housman, T.S. Eliot; with Keats and Dickens not far away.

2) A guided walk round John Betjeman's childhood homes and haunts, and readings of the poems he wrote about them.

3) A tour of the school's Hopkins, Betjeman and other literary archives, and its attractive museum.

4) Non-walking alternative: An illustrated presentation of Hopkins' and Betjeman's views on church architecture.

The Friday and Saturday dinners will be in Highgate restaurants. And there will be directions for self-guided tours of literary London on the Sunday. We imagine that many will have their own ideas where to stay for a weekend in London. But for those who want to be near at hand, the London Archway Premier Inn is at the foot of Highgate Hill.

The Hopkins & Betjeman Societies

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the individual contributors and not necessarily those of the Alliance. Please send copy for the next issue by 1st February to Mark Green markr_green@msn.com. We reserve the right to edit copy for space. The spring newsletter will be published in early March 2021.