JAMES HURNARD

JAMES HURNARD

A VICTORIAN CHARACTER

BEING PASSAGES FROM

The Setting Sun

SELECTED AND ARRANGED

BY

G. ROSTREVOR HAMILTON

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To

JOHN ARLOTT

MY DEAR JOHN,

Neither of us will forget the days, happy at least in this respect, when you in Southampton and I in London were using our spare time to rout round for topographical verse—the verse which we finally assembled, after much sifting, in *Landmarks*. Each of us made his own discoveries, and still more happily, having begun our enterprise as strangers, we discovered each other as friends.

As you know, it was my luck to come across Hurnard's *Setting Sun*, with its entertaining account of Colchester, on the shelves of that admirable institution, the London Library. The topography was only incidental; dipping here and there in Hurnard's pages, I scented an unusual character, and marked the book down for future reading. When I returned to it, I found more than I had hoped; there was a profusion (or, should I say confusion?) of things good in various ways, from which—by grace of the C.U.P.—I here present a choice. To whom should I dedicate the volume but to you?

Yours ever,

G.R.H.

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INTRODUCTION

JAMES HURNARD began his long poem *The Setting Sun** in January, 1867, and finished it in December, 1868. It is a stream of talk, and often he is a good talker, natural, lively, vigorous, with a tart humour and homely vividness. He looks back over his sixty years with a keen interest in himself and his times. With all his crotchets, he so takes you into his confidence, he is so ingenuous, candid, convinced, that you feel transported to those remote Victorian days. You see something of their politics and personalities, their machines and inventions, their arts, their recreations, their domesticities—and you see them at close quarters, through the eyes of a prejudiced but shrewd, and in many ways enlightened, observer.

True, he talks like a garrulous elder, and the poem, divided into seven long books, runs to nearly ten thousand lines. It might be thought to present too daunting a task to the reader, particularly as the subjects tumble out, one after another, with little order or shape. Speaking for myself, I have found *The Setting Sun* surprisingly readable: its rambling inconsequence is part of its quality, its charm as well as its fault, for even on a dull stretch you never know what good thing may be waiting round the corner. Yet at the end you need to sort out your impressions and bring them into focus, so that, however the whole be valued,

* Kitto, 1870.

there is strong reason for a selection, with drastic cutting and rearrangement. Hence the present volume, the plan of which will be clear from the Table of Contents.

Of the style not much is to be said. It is generally flat and prosaic, sometimes ludicrously so; yet being fluent, simple and unpretentious, it can do good service, adapting itself easily to the record of keen perceptions and the expression of forcible views. While metre and rhythm are monotonous, they cannot damp down the talker s naïve and eager vitality. Sometimes the very flatness is a thing to delight in, as when he writes of East Hill, Colchester—

> Where I brewed beer of excellent quality,
> Which I could confidently recommend
> As genuine, wholesome, and invigorating,
> And thereby earned a comfortable living.
> I hope my poetry may prove as good.

One more example: he describes how as a boy he had laboured hard at a poem which was to 'rouse the very heart of England' in favour of parliamentary reform; he could find no publisher to print it, but nevertheless the Reform Bill was carried—

> The thing was done without my thunderbolt,
> And done as well as if it had been fired:
> A very mortifying fact indeed.

Yet the flat verse—or, if you like, the measured-out prose—is capable of rising almost imperceptibly to humble but real poetry. There is a poetic freshness, for example, in the descriptions of Nature and the seasons—

Then comes the Winter, like a hale old man,
Wrapped in his cloak with frosty locks and beard.
Winter is the time for clear cold starlight nights,
And driving snows, and frozen roads and rivers,
For crowding round the blazing Christmas fire,
For telling tales that make the blood run cold,
For sipping elder-wine and cracking filberts,
For friendships, chilblains, fun, roast beef, mince pies,
And shivering fits on jumping into bed:
And thus the year goes round, and round, and round.

Again, in a moment of emotion, the verse can rise clean above its humdrum level, as at the end of a passage on Cobden—

Better than under the cold Abbey flag-stones
Amongst perennial primroses he sleeps.

Here there is a touch of poetical language; but there are not a few moving descriptions which, without any such heightening, go straight to the heart and prove their author a natural poet.

Moreover, for all his prolixity, Hurnard can frequently turn out a striking epigrammatic phrase—

With Neptune's wife 'tis always washing day....

He can perceive the needle's eye of truth
And thread it skilfully as if at random....

A poet puts the world into a nutshell;
The orator, out of a nutshell, brings a world....

The dappled deer is said to see the wind;
Your statesman only sees which way it blows....

How many a lofty and ambitious structure
Has no foundation but a mortgage bond!
And ah, how many an organ peals to heaven
With music tuned to promissory notes!

These are pleasures by the way. But on the whole the reward and entertainment of the reader lie less in the manner than the matter, and in the personality—honest, wilful and pugnacious—of the man himself. 'I care not', he writes—

I care not for punctilious correctness,
So that I gain in vigour and in spirit.
How wearisome is faultless namby pamby!

The style tends not so much to be incorrect and faulty (though ready enough on occasion to admit lines which defy all metre) as limp and undistinguished: but the vigour and spirit are there, and frequently triumph over it.

Hurnard was born at Boreham, near Chelmsford, in 1808, and died at Lexden, near Colchester, in 1881. In 1883 his widow edited a memoir, consisting mainly of an auto-biographical sketch. It supplements *The Setting Sun*, but is tame in comparison, and it includes odes and other verses which are more poetical in diction but far less individual.

In 1815 his father, after other small ventures which met with little success, took a mill at Kelvedon, near Colchester. In 1818 he sent James to a local boarding-school, but in the following year, his money troubles coming to a head, he

migrated with his wife and four children to America, 'where, according to popular report, it was less of a struggle to live'. For a time he settled with them at Wilmington, beside 'the grandly-flowing Delaware', but in 1824 a legacy enabled him to bring the family back from exile to Kelvedon. Finally, in 1828, he moved house to Colchester, where he set up as a brewer in a small way.

James had been 'a lively, lighthearted child', but apparently he grew up a lonely boy, deeply religious and with few boyish tastes, though 'excessively fond' of bathing and skating. His sisters died early, his mother in 1835, and his brother in 1838. Thus he was left alone with his father, to whom, until his death in 1866 at the age of 91, he devoted long years of service. Evidently the father, though a fine old man, was very masterful and exacting, and his own strong impulses seem to have been repressed and driven inwards. Now, 'enfranchised with a vengeance', he began his long outpouring in verse, only briefly interrupted by the 'astounding' incident of his marriage in August, 1867, to Louisa Bowman Smith, the daughter of an old friend.

In *The Setting Sun* Hurnard gives a revealing and intimate account of himself, a self of whom he had a high opinion, tempered by irony. But his character comes out in the whole poem, and not least in the expression of his dislikes. He was a good hater. Being a keen Radical—in 1842 he had attended an Anti-Corn Law conference in London as a deputy from the Colchester Association—he had his great heroes, Cobden, Bright and Gladstone, as well

as his great Tory villains, Eldon (whom he depicts as a complete ogre of wickedness) and Disraeli. He was proud of the English, and fond of 'good old Colchester'. Yet he was never more himself than when denouncing whole classes of Englishmen, and flaying his Colchester neighbours. Lawyers were a red rag to him. His account of a lawyer's bill (p. 93) is, in its way, a remarkable bit of writing: one can fancy it drawing from Uncle Toby his comment on the Curse of Ernulphus—'I declare, quoth my uncle *Toby*, my heart would not let me curse the devil himself with so much bitterness.'

Hurnard held enlightened Radical views on the ballot, on votes for women, on education and on other matters. As a Quaker, and as a disciple of Cobden, whose friendship he was proud to claim, it was natural that he should be opposed to expenditure on the army, being quite blind to its necessity and unfair to soldiers. His opinions on politics were sincerely, not to say violently, held, but it was when he passed beyond the political sphere that his independence of mind clearly showed itself. Thus, not content with emphasizing the need of a good Education Law, he pleads for training of the human voice—

> The human voice deserves especial culture
> In talking, reading, and in recitation,
> In concert to the subject of discourse,
> In tones impressive, natural, and clear,
> Refined by taste, exaggerating nothing.

In the Arts he was quite out of fashion. He disliked the literature and music of his day and, with far more discern-

ment, its architecture. While he rejoiced like a good Victorian in the Crystal Palace, and in the 'pretty little light conservatory' which he built for his wife, he could not endure the pretentious buildings that were springing up everywhere, the 'grinning Gothic architecture'—

> The narrow windows seem to squeeze my ribs;
> These pinnacles, like candlestick-extinguishers,
> Serve to put out the light of other days;
> Sepulchral doorways press my spirit down;
> These variegated bricks make me turn sick
> With recollections of gilt ginger-bread.

He was a curious observer, fancying for example that men betray their nationality by the way they hold their heads (p. 110). With a sharp eye on the object, he can vividly recreate a scene. Proud as he is of the march of Science, which has made life 'four times as pleasant' as before, he lingers regretfully over the picturesque travel by coach, recently ousted by railways. He gives a horrifying picture of a mid-Victorian borough election (p. 50), making us feel how relatively civilized we have since become. He also describes the Varsity boat-race (p. 59), and we realize pleasantly how little that institution has changed: in the eighteen-sixties there was the same eager interest in the rival crews and their prospects, shared by all classes alike; the same flow of spectators, though in different conveyances; the same crowds at the riverside windows, with boys perched high or hanging 'like autumn swallows to the bridges'; the same 'lumbering rout of steamers' in the wake of the boats. The scene, if a little

heightened in colour, is well painted in detail and in breadth—

> The dark blue terrier in a lady's lap
> Barks at the light blue spaniel at a window;
> Hundreds of thousands of all ranks and ages
> Cling round the neck of Father Thames and choke him. . . .

In 1837 Hurnard confessed to 'an ardent and instinctive love of fame'. He felt 'a strong internal conviction' that he possessed the uncommon gift of poetry; 'I seek', he wrote, 'by diligent observation and culture to render it available to lofty and worthy purposes, and thus make it a blessing, and not an evil, to myself and mankind.'

The conviction survived many years of disappointment, and was then to find livelier expression—

> I was born a poet and I know it.
> Let me pluck up my spirit manfully,
> I of this dunghill am cock, and I will crow.

He had his moments of doubt as to the fate of *The Setting Sun*, but he would not let them prevail. He wished it

> to be read and prized
> By common unsophisticated people,
> And find a home on every cottage shelf.

Alas for these high hopes! His widow records that 'opinions as to its merits were various', and I fear that the poem cannot have found many readers before it was forgotten. The *Athenaeum*, that 'loves to wield the scalpel' (p. 150), dealt with it by picking a few lines for quotation—

with the object, it seems, of light ridicule. But at least it is pleasant to infer that Colchester did not take offence at the poet's plain speaking, for in 1880, a few months before his death, it elected him an alderman of the borough.

Now, seventy-six years after publication, *The Setting Sun* makes a further bid for notice, as the self-portrait of a Victorian character, and as a likeness of the age in which he lived. If in 1870 it was, as he feared, 'too bold a likeness for these mincing times', in 1946 it may prove more acceptable. The life, certainly, has not gone out of it.

G.R.H.