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978-0-521-13670-9 - A. E. Housman: A Sketch

A. S. F. Gow

Excerpt

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A SKETCH

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A. E. H.

b. 26 MARCH 1859 *d.* 30 APRIL 1936

1870–1877	Bromsgrove School
1877–1881	St John's College, Oxford
1882–1892	H.M. Patent Office
1892–1911	University College, London
1911–1936	Trinity College, Cambridge

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ALFRED EDWARD HOUSMAN was born on 26 March 1859 at the Valley House, Fockbury, a scattered hamlet in Worcestershire some two miles from Bromsgrove, where his father, Edward Housman, was in practice as a solicitor. In 1870 he was elected to a foundation scholarship at the Grammar School of King Edward the Sixth, Bromsgrove (as Bromsgrove School was then called), and seven years later the school list shows him at the head of the school, which now numbered three of his four younger brothers among the scholars, winner of a large number of prizes in classical subjects, English verse, French, and, less expectedly, freehand drawing, and scholar elect of St John's College, Oxford.

The record is that of many another able schoolboy, and it would be as imprudent to detect the future editor of Manilius in the winner of Lord Lyttelton's prize for Latin Verse as to see presage of *A Shropshire Lad* in the headmaster's prize for an English poem. Housman himself provided more reliable evidence as to the growth of his scholarship. He used to ascribe his earliest interest in antiquity to J. E. Bode's *Ballads from Herodotus*, a book now wholly forgotten but sufficiently popular in the 'fifties to reach a second edition. No doubt this interest was fostered by Herbert Millington, who in 1873 succeeded Dr G. J. Blore as headmaster of Bromsgrove, for Housman spoke of him as a good teacher for a clever boy; but in his Cambridge Inaugural

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Lecture he said that what first turned his mind to classical studies and gave him a genuine liking for Greek and Latin was the gift, at the age of seventeen, of a copy of *Sabrinae Corolla*. It was, he pointed out, an appropriate beginning, for the editor of that volume of translations and its principal contributor was Benjamin Hall Kennedy, in whose honour the Latin chair at Cambridge was founded and subsequently named. Housman did not add, but some of his audience probably thought, that it had also another appropriateness, for the speaker himself had since culled a second and much fresher garland from the shores of Severn.

The lecturer went on to speak with enthusiastic appreciation of Kennedy's most eminent pupil and the first occupant of the chair. H. A. J. Munro, he said, was the Prometheus who fetched to England new fire from the altars of Lachmann and Madvig and Ritschl, and English scholars should salute him in the words with which Rome saluted the grave of Romulus—*o pater, o genitor, o sanguen dis oriundum, tu produxisti nos intra luminis oras*. Munro's *Lucretius*, *Horace*, and *Aetna* were published in the 'sixties, his *Criticisms and Elucidations of Catullus* in 1878, when Housman began his second year at Oxford. Housman never saw Munro, but at St John's College he had a copy of the *Catullus*, and probably therefore of the other books also, and he spoke, in the same lecture, of his vain attempts to obtain Munro's photograph and of the patience with which Munro had answered the letters addressed to him by an unknown Oxford undergraduate. The particular studies in which Housman was afterwards to make

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a name had thus begun to attract his attention, if not at school, at any rate quite early in his University career, and if they were not originally inspired by Munro, they were at any rate promoted by his writings and his encouragement. There is some irony in the reflexion that if Housman had not been told at school that his English was too poor to attract a Cambridge elector, they might have been fostered by Munro's personal teaching.

By his own University it is probable that they were not much fostered. In Cambridge it was Housman's whim to stress his alien origin, to address Oxonians resident in Cambridge at their occasional reunions as 'Fellow-exiles', and to threaten suicide if the Cambridge successes in the boat-race drew level in number with those of Oxford. In a more serious mood, however, he said that Oxford left little mark upon him except in the matter of friendships formed there; and in fact it is difficult to trace in his work evidence of what Oxford taught him. The Regius Professor of Greek throughout Housman's time was Jowett, and from the single lecture of Jowett's which he attended Housman came away disgusted by the Professor's disregard for the niceties of scholarship. Of Edwin Palmer, Corpus Professor of Latin until 1878, I never heard him speak, nor of his College teachers; of Palmer's successor, Henry Nettleship, never in terms which suggested that Housman was indebted to his teaching; and Nettleship in a testimonial spoke only of his acquaintance with Housman's published work. In 1879 Housman was placed in the first class in Moderations, but he won neither the Hertford nor the Ireland nor any University prize.

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There is some tradition of his having acquitted himself creditably in the scholarship examinations, but his name was never officially mentioned by the awarders¹, and I do not know him to have gone in for any prize except the Newdigate. For this he submitted in 1879 a poem on Iona produced at an all-night sitting. At the morning chapel service which followed the words 'we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing' fell ominously on his ears, and in fact the prize went to T. M. Macdonald, Exhibitioner of Brasenose. In 1881 he failed in Greats.

I once asked him how the examiners had achieved this feat, and he replied that they had no option. I do not think he bore them any grudge, and with two of them, Ingram Bywater and Herbert Richards, he was afterwards on friendly terms. The programme of Greats, apart from translations from and into Greek and Latin Prose, consisted of papers on Ancient History, Logic, and Moral and Political Philosophy, reinforced by others on a formidable array of prose authorities—Plato and Aristotle, Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon, Plutarch and Cicero, Sallust and Tacitus. Housman knew enough of ancient philosophy to express in after life a preference for Epicurean to Stoic, and for Aristippus ('who was not afraid of words') to either; and of modern philosophy to devote some derisive pages of his

¹ In the years of Housman's eligibility the Hertford was won by D. S. Margoliouth and C. A. James, the Ireland by D. S. Margoliouth, A. C. Clark, J. W. Mackail and C. A. James. In all these examinations except that for the Ireland in 1880 the names of one or more candidates beside that of the scholar were published in the award. Among those so mentioned were A. D. Godley, W. M. Lindsay and F. W. Pember.

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London Introductory Lecture to Herbert Spencer; but abstract thought of this kind was distasteful to him, and ancient history he valued less for its own sake than for the light it threw on ancient literature. The authors prescribed contained much good literature, but it was not for their literary merit that they were to be studied, and, in any case, Housman's chief love was poetry. The tuition provided by St John's College seems to have been uninspiring, or at any rate it failed to inspire him with interest in this curriculum, and he rebelled, choosing rather to spend his time over the text of Propertius than to devote himself to the pursuits proper to a Greats candidate. Probably he hoped to get through on his knowledge of Greek and Latin, but, in the event, whether because he had miscalculated the knowledge required, or because he was too fastidious to do ill what he was in no position to do otherwise, or from both reasons together, he showed up no answers to many of the questions set.¹ To what career he was at this time

¹ R. Y. Tyrrell, in 'The Old School of Classics and the New. A Dialogue of the Dead' (*Fortnightly Review*, Jan. 1888, p. 57), makes Bentley, complaining of the encroachments of archaeology upon classical studies, say to Madvig: 'He told me of a certain Oxford man who has of late published some conjectures which you or I might own with pride, and who had been "ploughed" at "Greats" in classics.' The Oxford correspondent of the *Journal of Education* took up this challenge in the following month, and made the reference plainer by speaking of 'a brilliant scholar who has contributed some really cogent emendations to Aeschylus and Propertius'. Oxford, he said, had two examinations for honours in classics, one of them in linguistic scholarship, the other in ancient history and philosophy. 'The brilliant scholar in question gained a first class in the first of these examinations, as he eminently deserved; he chose, in his own discretion, to avoid the reading required for the second, and accordingly was not classed in it.' From

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looking forward, I do not know, and perhaps he had not looked forward very far. But if he had thought of academic preferment at Oxford, he must have known that his performance in Greats would bar the way, and have renounced the idea. It would be rash, in view of what followed, to say that such a choice, if he made it, was wrong, and it may rather be that this failure was the spur which first urged his ambition to make himself a name in scholarly pursuits, but the result of his revolt was to banish him from academic life for eleven years.

In 1881, then, Housman found himself at the end of his Oxford career, but without a degree and without immediate prospects. He returned to Bromsgrove, where his family was now living, and devoted himself to such work as was necessary for the Civil Service examination. In the course of that and the following year he assisted his old headmaster in teaching the Sixth Form at Bromsgrove, where, as Millington wrote in a testimonial ten years later, he showed himself 'a thorough and sympathetic teacher warmly interested in his work and his pupils'. In 1882 he took the Civil Service examination, accepted, after declining a post in Dublin, a Higher Division Clerkship in the Patent Office, turned his back on the west country, and came to London.

For some years after his arrival he shared lodgings with an Oxford friend, M. J. Jackson, a fellow-clerk the official point of view this seems to be a perfectly fair statement of the case.

Bentley says that his scholar 'had been *proxime accessit* for the Ireland'. This is not true of Housman, but Tyrrell may not have wished his example to be drawn too closely from a particular individual.

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in the Patent Office, who is known by name to many classical students since Housman's *Manilius* is dedicated to him. Jackson had gone up to St John's College as a scholar at the same time as Housman, who was a year his junior, and during their fourth year the two, with A. W. Pollard, who was also a scholar of the College, had lived together in St Giles'. Jackson was a scientist and an athlete whose contempt for letters was unconcealed, and is, indeed, referred to in the dedication. For all that, he and Housman were united by a bond of friendship which was not broken when, in 1887, Jackson went to India as Principal of the Sind College, Karachi, and was extended to Jackson's four sons, one of whom was Housman's godson. Most of Jackson's life was spent abroad, and in later life the two friends met only when Jackson was at home on leave, but their correspondence was kept up until Jackson's death in British Columbia in 1923. Housman's interest in athletics was not greater than Jackson's in literature, and a photograph of the St John's College Eight owed its incongruous presence in his rooms to the fact that Jackson had rowed in it.

If certain poems in *A Shropshire Lad* are to be regarded as expressing the poet's own view of life, it would appear that Housman was unhappy in London and homesick for the country and for the friends he had left in Worcestershire, and no doubt town life was at first irksome to so eager and observant a lover of the country. He had, however, other friends in London besides Jackson, and it is not my impression that he was unhappy for long, or that he much disliked the

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work of the Patent Office. Long afterwards, when asked what he did there, he replied 'As little as possible,' but I have been assured by one who was with him in the Office that he was a very efficient public servant. He was for a short time private secretary to the Comptroller, but though the letters he wrote in that capacity were appreciated, his impatience of any alteration in his drafts and his outspoken criticisms were not, and he returned to the trade-mark department, where his principal duty was to scrutinise new applications and see that the mark proposed had not been previously registered by someone else. I have no doubt that he executed these tasks with the punctilious accuracy of all his work. Classical learning was of little use in office hours, though he was once sufficiently puzzled by a classical scene submitted for registration to enquire of the applicant what it represented, and elicited the information that it was the coronation procession of the Emperor and Empress Nero. On the other hand Housman's tastes were known and perhaps not unappreciated, for when he left the Office one of his superiors presented him with a Wedgwood medallion of Bentley, which lay on his writing desk to the end of his life. The gesture was friendly, though it was unfortunate that the Bentley represented should have been not the Master of Trinity but Wedgwood's partner Thomas Bentley.

The Patent Office, however, had this advantage that the hours were not so long and the work not so exacting but that Housman was left with time of his own, and sufficiently fresh after office hours to spend at the