

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-68004-3 - The Eighteen-Eighties: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature

Edited by Walter De La Mare

Excerpt

[More information](#)

POETS OF THE 'EIGHTIES

By MARGARET L. WOODS

I have tried very hard to catch my poets and pen them into the 'eighties; but poets are proverbially ill-regulated creatures and they will not play the game. Only a very few, like Shelley and Keats, have put all their work into a period of something like ten years. Others, like Wordsworth, Tennyson and our late Poet Laureate, have spread their activities over half a century. Baffled by this poetic perversity, I have changed the point of view and asked not what poets were writing in the 'eighties, but what living poets we who were young in the 'eighties were mainly reading. I have said living poets, because the idol of this generation was Shelley. Our admiration for Shelley was more than a literary taste, it was almost a religion. The Tennyson cult was over. We appreciated Tennyson as a poet, a great artist, but not as a thinker. Indeed his whole attitude of mind had ceased to be ours. Yet Browning, only a few years his junior, was at the height of his fame. No other poet had so strong and widespread an influence over this generation. Probably no other poet has been so widely quoted in the pulpit. His religious views were not in fact more definite than Tennyson's, but there was greater definiteness, greater frankness in their expression and a closer grapple with religious problems. But the generation of the 'eighties was less absorbingly interested in Religion than that of the 'fifties, and Browning's appeal to the Intelligentsia was

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-68004-3 - The Eighteen-Eighties: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature

Edited by Walter De La Mare

Excerpt

[More information](#)

not mainly religious. Ruskin had inoculated them with a passion for Italian Art and through Art with a passion for Italy, for Dante, for the Renaissance—of which Ruskin himself disapproved. To appreciate fully *The Bishop Orders His Tomb in St Praxed's* it is perhaps necessary to have a mental vision of St Praxed's and of the prelates and Popes of the period. Writers were beginning once more to turn their attention to the theatre, and although Browning early abandoned his attempt to write for the stage, his poems are essentially dramatic. His characters do not resemble the elegant lay figures of Tennyson, but stand on their feet and are vigorously alive. The realism of Browning appealed also to a generation which, unlike the preceding one, read French novels copiously, not only Balzac but Zola. It was for all these reasons that in the early 'eighties Browning Societies flourished and abounded. Some no doubt spent solemn hours in worrying over difficulties due not to obscurity of thought but to obscurity of expression. Others both read the poems and made them an avenue to the discussion of the various problems of Art, Drama, History, Human Character, set forth or implied in them.

Then there was a piquancy in the personal contrast between the two great poets of the moment, Tennyson and Browning. Tennyson, a romantic figure in his Spanish cloak and *sombrero*, represented the ideal of the Byronic generation, when poets desired to be recognized at sight as poets. Browning's unromantic, even conventional personality appealed more to a generation in which poets and painters, in England at any rate, almost invariably cut their hair and desired above all to look and behave like other people. But no generation is homogeneous and there were those who complained that Browning looked like a stockbroker and talked like

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-68004-3 - The Eighteen-Eighties: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature

Edited by Walter De La Mare

Excerpt

[More information](#)

POETS OF THE 'EIGHTIES

3

a man of the world. This view of him was like a bad photograph; it had a foundation in fact but gave a false impression of the personality. His face might have been that of a man of affairs of the first order—that is a man with imagination—and he was a man of the world in the best sense. He had not only seen but observed a great variety of worlds. The poet appeared in him in an uncommon way—in this he resembled Shelley, so unlike him in all else—he was singularly sympathetic, apparently always interested in the person with whom he was conversing rather than in himself. But this interest was not invariably sympathetic. I gathered that he and that prince of *poseurs*, Oscar Wilde, had not got on very well, for Oscar said to me, with some bitterness: “From Browning’s writings one would suppose that he could forgive almost any crime; but in fact he cannot forgive even the smallest social solecism”.

Oscar Wilde’s first volume of poems appeared early in the ’eighties. They were above the average but without force or originality, vaguely Swinburnian in matter and manner. I have never re-read them since their publication but feel sure that my opinion of them would not be raised by doing so. His real poetry was written when he had found another inspiration than that of vanity and lust, when he had drunk of the bitter cup of shame and sorrow. In Wilde’s poetry there was perhaps a more marked Swinburnian tone than in that of other young contemporary poets; but Swinburne had contributed certain new elements to the poetry of the period, which in the years following the publication of *Atalanta in Calydon* it had gradually absorbed. At first there was much direct imitation of his metres and manner but by the ’eighties direct imitation was rare, although his influence was considerable. Young in years

I-2

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-68004-3 - The Eighteen-Eighties: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature

Edited by Walter De La Mare

Excerpt

[More information](#)

he had already become a classic in two senses. For though during the 'eighties he poured forth a considerable volume of poetry, it was his early poems that were the most read. His new publications were received with due admiration and interest but with no thrill of excitement. At the time I think his public was a little puzzled by, ashamed of its want of enthusiasm, but on looking back one perceives the reason for it. Swinburne's genius showed no development. One who knew him well says of him that "at the age of 14 many of his life-long partialities and prejudices were formed". He had "all the lyre", but the marvellous melody that he played upon it seemed little but variations upon two or three themes. The real social problems of the day were looming large on the horizon and rhodomontade about Liberty and Priests and Kings sounded hollow. In the 'eighties he changed his revolutionary for a patriotic enthusiasm, but his best work was not in this vein. He, like others, wrote rondels and it was of his *Century of Rondels* published in 1883 that Tennyson, an excellent critic, said: "Swinburne is a reed through which all things blow into music".

D. G. Rossetti stood in somewhat the same position as Swinburne, for different reasons. Not merely his best poems, but the bulk of his work had been published by 1870. Busy with his other exacting art and in poor health he died in 1882 without adding much to the volume of his poetry. But he was much read and contributed his share to the poetic movement of his time.

Another member of the P.R.B. circle to which both Rossetti and Swinburne had belonged was William Morris. So early as 1858 he had published a volume of poems entitled *The Defence of Guinevere*, containing ballads with more emotional appeal, more dramatic than anything in his later work. I would recommend the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-68004-3 - The Eighteen-Eighties: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature

Edited by Walter De La Mare

Excerpt

[More information](#)

POETS OF THE 'EIGHTIES

5

Haystack in the Floods or the *Blue Chamber* to any young person not under a strict vow to read no poetry except that published since the War. Easily as Morris produced his poems, the many activities of his later years can have left him little time for the mere physical labour of writing the immensely long stories in which he delighted. I remember a brilliant man named Fearon who had been a schoolfellow of William Morris's at Marlborough. Games were not then regularly organized and they took long walks together in Savernake forest. During these walks Morris told Fearon a story, a serial continued from walk to walk and from term to term over a long period. At length it came to an end and Morris demanded that Fearon in his turn should tell him a long story of his own invention. Fearon, though a clever and witty boy, was incapable of producing such a story and Morris, disgusted with his incapacity, renounced his friendship. This extraordinary facility of invention was at once his strength and his weakness. It enabled him to pour out such works *à longue haleine* as the *Life and Death of Jason*, the *Earthly Paradise* and his later sagas with the utmost ease and in the midst of much other work. But it was also the source of the immense diffuseness which has caused them to fall into neglect, in spite of the many beautiful passages which they contain. Speaking of Morris and his followers at a meeting of the Oxford Browning Society I once called them the Tapestry School of Poetry. It seemed to me that this word indicated the decorative nature of Morris's work, the absence of atmosphere in it, and the unsubstantiality of its figures. *The Lovers of Gudrun* had indeed real dramatic force and feeling but these I thought it owed to the Icelandic Sagas from which the story was drawn.

William Morris was a striking figure. I remember

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-68004-3 - The Eighteen-Eighties: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature

Edited by Walter De La Mare

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 POETS OF THE 'EIGHTIES

thinking, as I watched him stride up and down our low Oxford drawing-room, that the bulk of his head and shoulders was so great that he might have been two men more indissolubly connected than the Siamese Twins. At this time he was writing his prose socialistic romance, *News from Nowhere*, carrying on his Oxford Street business very successfully and running the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings much less successfully, owing to a certain deficiency in common sense and tact. His socialism as expressed in *News from Nowhere* was unpractical and showed little understanding of human nature. I am led to this digression because in his last volume of verse there appeared a poem entitled *The Message of the March Wind* the beauty of which is impaired by the intrusion of socialistic false sentiment; for he calls on us to sympathize with the sorrows of poor working-men who have to live in towns, whereas we know that the very last thing that they wish to do is to live in the country. But could anything be more perfect than this picture of a spring evening in a Cotswold village?

From township to township, o'er down and by tillage,
Far, far have we wandered and long was the day;
But now cometh eve at the end of the village,
Where over the grey wall the church riseth grey.

There is wind in the twilight; in the white road before us
The straw from the ox-yard is blowing about;
The moon's rim is rising, a star glitters o'er us,
And the vane on the spire-top is swinging in doubt.

Down there dips the highway, toward the bridge crossing over
The brook that runs on to the Thames and the sea.
Draw closer, my sweet, we are lover and lover;
This eve art thou given to gladness and me.

Matthew Arnold was one of the veterans whose poems continued to be much read. Mentally he was a

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-68004-3 - The Eighteen-Eighties: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature

Edited by Walter De La Mare

Excerpt

[More information](#)

POETS OF THE 'EIGHTIES

7

pioneer, a connecting link between two generations. His prose works no doubt played a part in giving him his fame. I think it was in the early 'nineties that I was introduced in an omnibus to an intelligent working-man who afterwards became a friend. His first remark to me was: "Are you a disciple of Carlyle?" I replied, perhaps with emphasis, that I was not. "Ah!" he exclaimed triumphantly, "then you must be a follower of Matthew Arnold." And I was ashamed to confess that I was not even that. Matthew Arnold, besides being a poet, was in his prose writings one of the pioneers of what may be called the French Movement, characteristic of the time.

One result of the keen interest felt at this time in all things French was the vogue of old French poetic forms, the ballade, the triolet and the rondel. We have seen that Swinburne wrote a *Century of Rondels*. Among lesser men, Andrew Lang was the master of this particular lyre and his *Ballades in Blue China* deserve to be better remembered. These highly artificial forms do not seem suited to the expression of deep feeling, but Charles d'Orléans and Villon have shown that the ballade at any rate can be made hauntingly sad or terribly tragic.

It may be thought that I should name George Meredith among the poets of the 'eighties, but in fact his reputation as a poet came later. Long as he had been writing, it was only in the 'eighties that he had begun to be generally proclaimed as a great novelist.

Where shall I place Christina Rossetti? By herself surely, for though by birth and association she belonged to the P.R.B. circle, in spirit she stood apart from it. In earlier days her work had been somewhat overshadowed by that of her brother, but its fame had gradually grown. *Goblin Market*, a charming phantasy

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-68004-3 - The Eighteen-Eighties: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature

Edited by Walter De La Mare

Excerpt

[More information](#)

published in the 'sixties, had found not a few admirers; then came her love songs with cadences all their own and those religious lyrics which are her most valuable contribution to the literature of her time. There had been nothing like them since the seventeenth century; yet Christina's art was not imitative but highly individual. She had an ear which guided her unerringly through the measures of verse which must have seemed in the 'sixties highly irregular. Both her religious and her love poems might be accused of being too generally of a sad, even gloomy nature, but her sing-songs for children restore the balance.

Turning from these old inhabitants of Parnassus to those who published their first volumes of poetry in the 'eighties, one finds the decade opening with the name of one who stands perhaps first in genius—James Thomson. But to weigh genius in the scale is infinitely difficult. The sparkle of a dewdrop in its day may delight us more than the secular glow of a ruby. Yet in sheer power of creative imagination James Thomson undoubtedly stands above any other poet of his generation. Here again it is difficult to decide to what generation he belongs, for although his literary life may be said to begin with the publication of his first volume of poems in 1880, he was born in 1834. *The City of Dreadful Night* had appeared serially in Bradlaugh's newspaper, *The National Reformer*; not a paper in which literary critics could have been expected to unearth a poet. By a fortunate accident the poem was seen and appreciated by Bertram Dobell and others, and Dobell succeeded, not without difficulty, in finding a publisher for a volume of Thomson's poems, the casual and unvalued harvest of many vagabond years. They at once attracted attention, especially *The City of Dreadful Night*.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-68004-3 - The Eighteen-Eighties: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature

Edited by Walter De La Mare

Excerpt

[More information](#)

POETS OF THE 'EIGHTIES

9

By the opening of the 'eighties there had come a marked reaction from the optimism of the Tennysonian period, a wave of literary pessimism. But the pessimism of James Thomson was no matter of literary fashion. It was neither a philosophy nor a vague emotion. It was the bitter fruit of a bitter experience of life. Of Scottish birth, he had been educated and evidently not ill educated, in a Home for Scottish children. By some chance he became instructor in an Army School. At the age of twenty he loved and was beloved by a young girl who died suddenly. He is said never to have recovered from the shock of this catastrophe and it may have been the cause of his falling a victim to that foul fiend which so often chooses its prey among men who are gifted above their fellows. One surmises it to have been drink which cost him his post in the Army, which was evidently not distasteful to him. It certainly was this haunting curse which drove him about the world, from one job to another, through the next score of years. The wonder is not that his writings should have been often fraught with gloom, but that he should have been able, during so storm-tossed an existence, to produce so great a volume of poetry and so much of it of a high order.

In *Sunday up the River* and other pages of this first volume there are pleasant lyrics, such as the well-known song beginning:

Give a man a horse he can ride,
Give a man a boat he can sail,
And his rank and wealth, his strength and health
On sea nor shore shall fail.

But it is not in these that James Thomson's peculiar power is seen—his power of interpenetrating the ordinary stuff of life with weird superterrestrial phantasies—as in the poem called *In the Room*.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-68004-3 - The Eighteen-Eighties: Essays by Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature

Edited by Walter De La Mare

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The City of Dreadful Night is a work of genius akin to the *Inferno* of Dante and the Hell scenes in Milton's *Paradise Lost*; to say which is not to put it on a level with these classics, but merely to describe its kind. One fundamental difference between these masterpieces and James Thomson's poem perhaps explains the fact that it has not strengthened its hold upon fame in the fifty years which have passed since its publication. Dante placed real people in his Hell, mainly people he knew and disliked. Milton, though not so directly personal, created characters in Satan and his Cabinet Ministers which one cannot but believe to have been modelled on those of men whom the poet had met in the circle of the Protector. In *The City of Dreadful Night* there are no real people, only types. Nevertheless it is a work of fine terrific imagination. Some fame, some appreciation of his powers came to James Thomson with the publication of these poems. But it came too late. He died in 1882, at the age of forty-eight.

The wave of Pessimism, itself a reaction, soon produced what may be called a back-wash in the school of Determined Cheerfulness, of which W. E. Henley was probably the originator, although R. L. Stevenson was its most popular exponent. These two young men met, both of them apparently doomed to a life of invalidism, in an Edinburgh hospital. There they cemented an alliance which was to have a considerable influence on the literary output of the later 'eighties and the 'nineties. Stevenson's was the richer imagination, but in character Henley appears to have been the leader; for it was as a leader that he was regarded by a brilliant circle of young men who gathered round him in the 'nineties. In Stevenson the Scot, Determined Cheerfulness takes on the guise of a religious Faith—as in *The Celestial*