

Editorial

Mr E. E. Bissell died on 29 January. The following pages carry a brief account of his life and an eloquent appreciation of him and his contribution to Powys Studies. As someone who came to know him well in recent years I feel obliged to add my comments on the passing of a remarkable man. Ruth Pringle's obituary details a life which was not without sadness and disappointments, the earliest of which must have been his father's insistence that he left school at fifteen. Even in his eighties Mr Bissell's sharpness of intellect, precision of memory and passion for literature and the arts were so impressive as to leave me wondering why he had not followed a career in perhaps teaching, or some other academic calling. I now realise that it is possible that Mr Bissell's passion for collecting and studying literature and art may have been, to some extent, a compensatory activity arising out of disappointment and loss, although I have to say this was not apparent in my contact with him.

Paul Roberts has said that Mr Bissell was much more than a collector. During hours of conversation, in which one treasure after another would be revealed, I constantly wondered at the breadth of his literary interests and the depth and detail of his knowledge of the Powyses. The one subject that never (save once, and then for a specific reason) entered into discussions, was the value of his collection, which the great auction houses are now vying with one another to handle. Thanks to Mr Bissell's selfless foresight, the largest single element in that collection, the Powys material was given to the Society before his death. It is a matter of speculation, and no more relevant to us than it was to Mr Bissell, what

Subscriptions — please see page 29.

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value Christies or Sothebys would have placed on that gift, but along with Francis Feather's collection, it constitutes a major resource and a responsibility to future generations of scholars which the Committee takes very seriously indeed.

Mr Bissell joined the Society in its earliest days, when it was to all intents and purposes 'a John Cowper Powys Society'. He was undoubtedly one of the earliest collectors of JCP's work and certainly ahead of his time in so far as, from the outset, he was interested in the whole remarkable family. E. E. Bissell was appointed an Honorary Member of The Powys Society, and we have no greater mark of appreciation to confer. However, I am confident in suggesting that he was unique in having been singled out for that distinction without ever attending any meeting of the Society. He was as shy and diffident as he was generous and The Powys Society went to him.

My abiding memory of Mr Bissell is of his shadowy figure behind the curtains as my car drew up (always at precisely 2 p.m.). There followed three or four hours of fascinating conversation stimulated intermittently by the revelation of some new and unexpected item from his collection. And then, his smiling figure framed in the doorway of that modest house as I left for home, on occasions, my car weighed down with box upon box of books, letters and manuscripts for the Dorset County Museum.

On one visit I was accompanied by Leslie Harrison, a great bibliophile and former Baptist Minister. We were in an upstairs room where we had been looking at the complete first editions of *Winnie The Pooh*, signed by Milne and Shepard along with many original drawings, some of which were never used, the Swinburn family photograph album, Kenneth Graham's copy of *Wind in the Willows* (inscribed for his son) and the original art work for the dust wrapper, the first edition of *The Origin of Species* ... – I could go on. At some point Mr Bissell left the room and Leslie Harrison whispered, 'Do you think this is what Heaven will be like?' Mr Bissell would certainly not have subscribed to that train of thought, but he deserved that it should be.



John Batten

Mr E. E. Bissell

Members of the Powys Society will be deeply saddened to learn of the death of Mr E. E. Bissell on 29 January 1998. Mr Bissell was not only a great Powys enthusiast and collector, but also a generous benefactor of our Society and a valued friend and patient advisor to many of its members.

I was honoured to be asked by Mr Bissell's nephew and executor, Andrew Britton, to represent The Powys Society at Mr Bissell's funeral on Friday 6 February and to speak briefly about what Mr Bissell had meant to our Society and to the book-collecting world in general. I was also pleased to be joined on this sad occasion by Sarah Linden, Bev Craven and Peter Foss, all members of the Society who had been touched by Mr Bissell's kindness.

After the funeral, with a view to writing an obituary, I asked Andrew Britton's sister, Ruth Pringle if she would be kind enough to provide me with a few basic facts about her uncle's life. When her notes arrived shortly afterwards they seemed so complete in themselves that it would have been an impertinence to re-arrange them over my own name, and I therefore have decided, with the editor's approval, to present Ruth Pringle's obituary of Mr Bissell, followed by an extract from my address at the funeral.

E. E. Bissell was a great collector and only now, as his family grapple with the task of ordering his estate, is the extent of his magnificent collection becoming clear. Those of us who were lucky enough to have known him, however briefly, as a friend may count ourselves fortunate, for it seems clear that his name will become legendary.

Paul Roberts

Edward Ernest Bissell was born on 3 December 1910 in Leamington Spa, the second of five children and the eldest son of William Ernest Bissell and Mabel Harriet Bissell, née Sewell.

When he was six years old he contracted diphtheria and nearly died. His mother rushed him to the local hospital where, after she had pleaded with the doctor to save his life, he was isolated and given a tracheotomy. This was the first time that this experimental operation had been performed in the region! Unfortunately, the illness caused him to become deaf in his left ear.

He attended St Paul's Church of England Primary School (1914-22) and won a scholarship to the grammar school, Leamington College for Boys (1922-25). He worked well at both schools, receiving very good reports. His fellow pupil at the College was Sir Frank Whittle, inventor of the jet engine.

Although Mr Bissell wanted to continue his studies, his father insisted that he leave school and work in the family firm, Bissell's Bicycles, attending to the financial accounts. This caused him much bitterness, but he had no alternative at the time, being only fifteen years old.

After about two years he left and set up an undertakers firm with his cousin Geoffrey Russell, but after only one funeral his cousin unexpectedly died, leaving Mr Bissell at a loss once more.

He applied to join the police force, but was refused due to his deafness. This disability also prevented him from learning to play the violin successfully as it was in his left ear and, as he said, the sound had to travel all the way round the corner before he heard it!

Mr Bissell was brought up as a Methodist and joined in all chapel activities, especially the concerts, which he scripted and made quite humorous. He was a Sunday school teacher too, but around this time he began to read books on Humanism and decided that he no longer believed in the faith of his upbringing and from then onwards he stated that he was an agnostic, and he joined the Rationalist Society.

He obtained a place in the offices of the large engineering company of Borg and Beck, where he later became head of his department. He obtained a Diploma in Commercial Engineering in 1939.

It was there that he met his wife, Cynthia Morgan. They married at St. George's Anglican church at Newbold Pacey on 26 April 1943. Although Mr Bissell would have preferred a civil marriage, his wife was a practising Christian.

He was then called up for war service in the R.E.M.E. and was stationed at many barracks: Norton in Worcestershire, Paisely in Scotland, Woolwich and Blackheath in London, Wrexham in Denbighshire, Long Eaton and Chilwell in Nottinghamshire and Nuneaton in Warwickshire.

His father-in-law died suddenly in 1945 and Mr Bissell was given a compassionate discharge in order to run the family business of general stores and Post Office in the village of Ashorne, where they lived.

In 1952 Mrs Bissell lost their only child, and this affected her general health. In 1960 the doctor advised Mr Bissell to retire and help his wife to lead a quiet life. This he did, and organised the only holiday that they were to have together during their marriage, but sadly Cynthia was already ill and died on this holiday on 11 September 1960.

Mr Bissell returned to live with his mother-in-law, who lived on until 1974, and he occupied his time by pursuing his passion for literature and music, and gathering together collections of these art forms.

He was a Special Constable for many years, becoming a sergeant and receiving a long-service medal. He also served on the local Parish Council for several years and was a pillar of the village community.

He was asked by a local garage owner to help him sort out the firm's books, so Mr Bissell worked part-time at Thorpe's garage, Wellesbourne in later life.

Mr Bissell began to decline over Christmas 1997, but remained at home until he was taken into Warwick hospital, where he died the next day, 29 January 1998, aged eighty-seven years.

His ashes were laid to rest in his wife's grave at Newbold Pacey church, where they were married, and just down the road from where they had lived at the small village of Ashorne.

Ruth Pringle

Mr E. E. Bissell

**Read on the occasion of his funeral at Oakley Wood crematorium,
Warwickshire on Friday 6 February 1998.**

May I say, first of all, what an honour it is to have been asked by Andrew Britton to speak as Chairman of The Powys Society on this sad occasion.

Our Society is devoted to the study and celebration of the lives and works of the members of the Powys family, that remarkable collection of West Country writers and artists, and in particular of the three most famous brothers, John Cowper, Theodore Francis and Llewelyn.

Some years ago, just after my first visit to Ashorne, I received a letter from Mr Bissell which ended with the words 'My friends call me Ted'. Naturally, I was touched by such kindness, but I still found it hard not to think of him as Mr Bissell, a name which had come to symbolize, both to myself and to literally hundreds of others, an almost legendary figure in the world of literature and book collecting, a man who knew all there was to know about Lewis Carroll, Kenneth Grahame, W. H. Davies, Algernon Charles Swinburne and a host of other writers.

Mr Bissell's interest in the Powys family began in 1931, with a copy of this little book, *The Pathetic Fallacy* by Llewelyn Powys, which he bought for a shilling from W.H. Smith in Leamington.

Powys's book had two profound effects on Ted Bissell: first, he cut out and sent off an application form to join The Rationalist Press Association, the forerunner of The Humanist Society, and, second, he set about discovering all he could about the author's family and began collecting their books.

To the end of his life he remained firm in his Humanist convictions and kept abreast of current humanist literature and thought. He also remained devoted to his Powys collection, which soon extended beyond books, to include manuscripts, letters and personal artefacts, many of which were given to him by members of the Powys family – especially by Alyse Gregory, the widow of Llewelyn Powys and Phyllis Playter, the companion of John Cowper Powys. They saw in Mr Bissell – and I cannot imagine even those forceful and charismatic women calling him anything else – a proper guardian and custodian of these treasures: and so he proved to be.

Eventually, the Bissell Collection, as it became known, grew to rival – and in some ways to outshine – all other Powys collections, including those of Colgate

University in New York and The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Texas.

Yet Mr Bissell was never merely an accumulator: he knew his collections intimately and even in his later years could call to mind details of a single letter among hundreds and find it without hesitation. It is for this reason that he became an inexhaustible source of information for scholars, critics, editors and interested readers – inexhaustible in both senses, in that his knowledge seemed endless and he never tired in his efforts to make his collection accessible, transcribing manuscripts from the sometimes almost illegible scrawls of the various members of the Powys family into his own clear, firm hand sometimes sending precious documents through the post and often inviting readers to his home.

It is, indeed, no exaggeration to claim that there has not been a single piece of serious Powysian research in the last thirty years that has not owed something to Ted Bissell. Typical of many are these remarks from Peter Foss in his 1991 book, *A Study of Llewelyn Powys*:

In particular my thanks are due to Mr E. E. Bissell, of whom it can truly be said that without his aid this work could not have been written. From the time I first examined his important collection in 1981, living with it for many weeks, to the corrections he helped me make to part of the bibliography, he has been unstintingly generous and valuable in his help. I owe him a good deal.'

Within the past five years, Mr Bissell has done our Society the honour of entrusting it with his Powys collection, which is now housed in the Dorset County Museum. Already, some of the books and artefacts are on public display in the newly-opened Writers' Gallery, but our first obligation as a Society must be to ensure that the collection is properly catalogued and conserved in order that it may be made available to many future generations of scholars.

In that way, we can carry on the work of Mr E. E. Bissell, a modest, reserved, unfailingly kind and genuinely great man – though I am certain he would have refused to recognize himself in any such description. Yet his greatness is marked in the acknowledgements pages of innumerable books. Like Peter Foss, we all 'owe him a good deal'.

It became known in the Powys Society that Mr Bissell was a man who appreciated punctuality and so it became common practice for those who visited him to park a mile or so away, to ensure that they arrived as close as possible to the appointed time. In a sense it became a sort of game in which Mr Bissell joined with quiet humour.

And so I will end now – as punctually as possible – by expressing on behalf of those many friends who cannot be here today, the love, respect and profound admiration in which Ted Bissell is held for having made Ashorne the centre of a world-wide network of literary scholarship and bookish goodfellowship.

Paul Roberts

The Election of Officers and Committee Members To Take Effect from 25 August 1998

In accordance with the Society's constitution, the Committee has prepared the following slate of nominations of Committee Members and Officers, to take effect from the next Annual General Meeting.

<i>Chairman</i>	Paul Roberts
<i>Vice-Chairman</i>	Griffin Beale
<i>Secretary</i>	Chris Gostick
<i>Treasurer</i>	Stephen Powys Marks
<i>Committee</i>	John Powys, Judith Stinton, John Batten, Bev Craven, Chris Wilkinson, John Williams and Bruce Madge

John Williams is standing for re-election under the three-year rule and Bruce Madge is nominated in place of Timothy Hyman who has decided to stand down after many years of service on the Committee.

The Committee consists of four Officers and seven Committee members, thus a full slate has been nominated. However, the Constitution invites members to submit further nominations if they so wish, in which case a postal ballot will be held.

In the event of a ballot, brief statements of appropriate information will be required, including details of involvement in the Society and reasons for wishing to take up the position. Initially, any nomination must be made by post, and must indicate whether it is for a specific office or membership of the Committee. The letter must have the names and signatures of :

a) the proposer and

b) the seconder

and also

c) the nominee's signature and agreement to stand.

Proposers, seconders and nominees must all be paid-up or honorary members of the Society ; the usual reminder slips are being sent out with this *Newsletter* to those who have not paid subscriptions due for 1998.

Such nominations should be received by the Nominations Secretary:

John Batten, Keeper's Cottage, Montacute, Somerset, TA15 6XN
not later than 19 June 1998.

HAVE YOU PAID YOUR SUBSCRIPTION ?

Please see page 29.

*The 27th Annual Conference of The Powys Society
Kingston Maurward College of Agriculture Dorchester
22nd-25th August 1998*

As already announced, this year's Conference will be held at Kingston Maurward, which has proved to be easily our most popular venue. Attendance there has been more than double that of any other location used since 1992 and it needs no further introduction. Members will note that last year's prices have been held. The cost for delegates attending the whole conference will be £150, with the usual pro rata arrangements available for part-conference and day delegates.

The final details of the conference programme will be published in the July Newsletter.

Saturday afternoon 22nd August Arrival.
Tuesday morning 25th August Departure

OUTLINE DRAFT PROGRAMME

Professor W. J. Keith *John Cowper Powys, The Literary Criticism of a Bookworm*

Professor J. Lawrence Mitchell *Theodore Powys, The Artist at Work*

Anthony Glyn *The Life and Work of Elizabeth Myers*

Paul Roberts *John Cowper Powys and His Popular Contemporaries*

Christopher Wilkinson *The Friendship of Llewelyn Powys and Louis Wilkinson*

Dr David Gervais *The Religious Comedy of T. F. Powys*

John Batten *Llewelyn Powys, Journalist*

There will also be

A contrasting evening session

One free afternoon

The Annual General Meeting of the Society.

In order to avoid waste of time and postage members are requested to return the enclosed application form **only if they are seriously interested in attending.**

More than half the members pay their subscriptions by standing order.

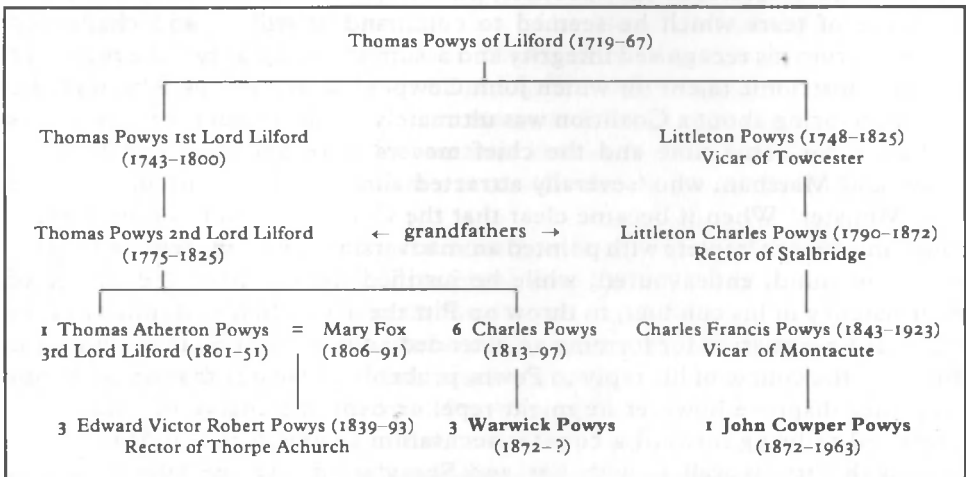
What about you ? Please ask the Treasurer for a form.

Some Powys Cousins

It has generally been thought that the creative talent and emotional sensibility of the Powys children were derived mainly from their mother's family which traced its descent from William Cowper and John Donne; but there is evidence that similar qualities characterised the Powyses, together with the eloquence and power of public speaking which were particularly John Cowper's.

The family first came to prominence in the eighteenth century. Thomas Powys of Lilford had two sons; the younger, Littleton, became vicar of Towcester and married Mary Priscilla Shaw; their eldest son, Littleton Charles Powys, rector of Stalbridge, was the grandfather, with whom we are all familiar, of John Cowper Powys. The elder brother, Thomas, educated at Eton and King's College Cambridge, became Sheriff of Northamptonshire in 1768 and MP for the county from 1774 till 1797. He emerges most vividly from the *Historical Memoirs of My Own Time* by Sir William Wraxall.

On 8 March 1782, for example, 'Lord John Cavendish, seconded by Powis (then member for Northamptonshire, since raised by Pitt to the Peerage) introduced various resolutions imputing the misfortunes of war, to the "want of foresight and ability in Ministers".'¹ The next month when Burke re-introduced his Bill for the reduction of the Civil List, both Burke and Powys who seconded the motion for an Address of Thanks to the King, on his message relative to this subject, melted into tears at the prospect of their approaching triumph over court profusion and corruption.²



Outline Family Tree showing people mentioned in the text

Numbers refer to birth order in family

(Information from the *Victoria County History of Northamptonshire, Genealogical Volume* (1906))

On 1 December the following year Powys opened 'the memorable debate on the East India Bill'. Wrxall continues ... 'his beautiful animadversions on the double author of the measure; a metaphor drawn likewise from Holy Writ, made a strong impression. "I hear indeed," said he, "the voice of Jacob," meaning Fox, "but the hands are those of Esau". ... Powis did not hesitate to denominate the Bill "the modern Babel which had almost reached the clouds" and compared Fox's treatment of the East India Company with "Shylock's demand of a pound of flesh, to be cut nearest the heart"'.³ This personal and immediate application of scripture and literature is equally characteristic of Thomas Powys's great-great nephew. If John Cowper Powys was aware that his forbear debated on an equal footing with the great Charles James Fox he does not say so, but it is likely that he was aware, because as a history scholar he probably read Wrxall. A verbal echo lends credence to this. When Pitt came to office at the beginning of 1784 he was surrounded by his henchmen. Powys referred to these as his 'body guard composed of light young troops who shoot their little arrows with amazing dexterity against those who refuse to swear allegiance to their chief'.⁴ Readers of *Porius* will be reminded of the skilled archers who served the same purpose for Derwydd.

In 1784 MPs, in Wrxall's words, 'distinguished for Character, Large Property and Uprightness of Intention' attempted to reconcile Fox and Pitt so that their talents should be united for the benefit of the country. Their nominal Chairman was Sir Thomas Grosvenor, but their 'Deliberations and proceedings were chiefly conducted by the Honourable Sir Charles Marsham and Mr. Powis who commonly prefaced his speeches, on occasions of interest, by a copious discharge of tears which he seemed to command at will ... and challenged attention from his recognised integrity and assumed impartiality'.⁵ We recognise the same histrionic talent for which John Cowper was so famous. Although the attempt to bring about a Coalition was ultimately unsuccessful the negotiations continued for some time and the chief movers were Sheridan and Erskine, Powys and Marsham who 'severally attracted almost as much attention as the First Minister'. When it became clear that the Coalition could not be formed, Powys in a speech 'replete with pointed animadversions and conceived with great powers of mind, endeavoured, while he justified himself from the charge of inconsistency in his conduct, to throw on Pitt the accusation of duplicity in his pretended negotiation for forming an extended administration.' Pitt 'with great ability, in the course of his reply to Powis, probably conscious that he could not altogether disprove however he might repel or deny the charge of insincerity, continued to bring forward a counter accusation against him and Marsham'.⁶ Thus with Pitt, as well as with Fox and Sheridan, do we see John Cowper's forbear disputing on equal terms. Wrxall says that after the failure to bring about a Coalition Powys and Marsham 'disappeared from the scene where they had recently performed as the chief characters', rather as John Cowper disappeared

from the American lecture circuit.

However, the *Later Correspondence of George III*⁷ contains numerous references to Powys and the way he voted in the various debates, first on one side and then on another as he saw the force of the arguments. Again we are reminded of the difficulty of forming an accurate interpretation of John Cowper's varying political opinions. On 13 February 1793 Powys seconded Pitt's address, but a week later votes with Fox and Sheridan among others, in support of Fox's Five Resolutions.⁸ In May he voted against a petition⁹ for Parliamentary reform, and a year later he again voted with Fox and Sheridan against the motion 'in which it was alleged that Ministers had broken the law in the form of the Bill of Rights and Act of Settlement in bringing in foreign troops, namely the Hessians'.¹⁰ In the same month he supported the Attorney General in his recommendations in a letter circulated to Lords Lieutenant of the counties that companies of Volunteers to augment the militia, together with bodies of infantry and cavalry for local defence in the maritime districts should be paid for by a general subscription. Sheridan, however, moved that such a subscription was unconstitutional and Fox supported him.¹¹

A year later, in May and again in June, Powys voted with Fox in debates about the size of the Prince of Wales's establishment; they supported the larger allowance.¹² But in November when Sheridan proposed a motion to appoint a Select Committee to enquire into 'the proof of seditious proceedings', Powys opposed it as 'totally unnecessary and tending to delay', while Fox supported it 'with great violence'.¹³ Thus we see how Thomas Powys, at every turn, judged every issue on what seemed to him its merits. He was twice offered a post in Government, once by the Rockingham Administration and once by Shelburne who had considered him for Secretary of War, but both times he declined. For Shelburne he admitted that, like many other members, he had 'no great predilection'; but he also prided himself on his independence. It is not clear whether it was in spite of it, or because of it, that he was created Baron Lilford on 26 October 1797.

Like most of the Powyses through the generations Thomas was prolific. He had five sons and seven daughters. His eldest son the second Lord Lilford outdid his father and had six sons and six daughters; the eldest of these, Thomas Atherton Powys, born 2 December 1801, married Mary Elizabeth Fox, only surviving daughter of Henry Richard Fox, 3rd Lord Holland, the nephew of Charles James Fox. Of her son-in-law, Mary's mother wrote in a letter to her son, 'He has never swerved from the most devoted love for her ... tho' we are not yet sufficiently acquainted with him or his family to appreciate all the good qualities people give him. What is well known is that he was an admirable son, and to numerous brothers and sisters he acted like a parent. He is beloved and popular near his own residence.'¹⁴ Mary's brother, the 4th Lord Holland, died in 1859 and with him the title; Powys's wife Mary was her father's sole heir; she lived till 1891. True to

Powys fashion, she and Thomas had a large family of four sons and six daughters.

The third son, Edward Victor Robert Powys, clerk in holy orders and a godson of Queen Victoria, seems to have inherited the Fox papers from his mother; for when John Drinkwater published his biography *Charles James Fox* in 1928 the prefatory note tells us: 'Lord Sandwich has allowed me to make free use of the fourth Earl's papers at Hinchinbrooke; the Hon. and Rev. V. R. Powys has extended a similar kindness in respect of a number of his great grand uncle's letters and the manuscript diaries of Mrs. Fox.'¹⁵ Interesting quotations from these duly appear in the book, but their present whereabouts is unknown.

The second Lord Lilford's sixth son Charles, younger brother of Thomas Atherton, was a Lt. Col. of the Leicestershire Yeomanry. By his second marriage he had a daughter and three sons the youngest of whom, Warwick, John Cowper met entirely by chance when visiting a ranch in New Mexico where Warwick was working in August 1927. Warwick was allowed a few days leave and the cousins went about together. 'He seems', wrote John Cowper to Llewelyn, 'to have inherited all the most gentle and refined characteristics of our ancestors and no others – though in many ways he's so simple minded its hard to see how he has held his head above waters at all.'¹⁶ In June the following year John Cowper stayed with Warwick on his ranch for four days; 'tho' I had to drink coffee and tea without any milk the bread he makes is very good, and we saw a heron in the stream which runs thro' his canyon and also a kingfisher, and upon the rocks above, what he averred to be two eagles ...' he wrote to Llewelyn.¹⁷

On 1 August 1930 cousin Warwick arrived at John Cowper's house, Phudd Bottom, for 'a stay of six weeks'; unable to cope with two of a kind Phyllis left on the 5th for a visit to her parents. Warwick was evidently down and out and rather mad; Powys's feelings veer between intense irritation and a desire to be kind. On 10 August he wrote in his diary, 'Warwick has dropped his autobiography and only writes verses. He is a child out of school, a queer one out of an asylum, a Bastille prisoner out of the Bastille. ... the effort of coping with Warwick has reduced my humanity to its limit ... I become a slave to Warwick just because he is a sort of liberated slave – sulky as a child if he is not allowed what he wants ...'¹⁸ and on the 12th, '... he is a heartbreaking individual. He makes you feel such pity – but when he sings and sings and shouts and curses and talks drivell it is very hard to be nice ...'¹⁹ Finally on 14 August, after a little more than three weeks of the intended six, John Cowper gets Warwick to New York and onto a train for Buffalo, for which Powys had to pay. Phyllis returns the next day!

In *Autobiography* Powys makes light of the downside of his two habitations with cousin Warwick, saying that '... we have twice lived very complacently together as bachelors ... like myself cousin Warwick is almost superstitiously credulous about our ancestral connection with the Ancient Powys-land of Mid-Wales.'²⁰ Neither seems to have been aware of their much more authentic relationship to the eloquent and virtuous eighteenth-century parliamentarian Thomas Powys, 1st

Baron Lilford. Powys notices however, 'through all the dividing medium of fifth cousinship, many curious resemblances in our emotional feelings,'²¹ which may be taken as the last word on kinship. But Powys's concern in the two major novels of his Welsh years with rulers and armies and priests may indicate an awareness, albeit subconscious, of parts played by his real forbears in the days of Empire, their names perhaps mentioned nowhere but in the *Victoria County History of Northamptonshire*.

Susan Rands

NOTES

Wraxall spells Powys with an 'i'; that spelling has been retained when quoting from him.

¹ *Historical References of My Own Time*, Sir Nathaniel William Wraxall (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1904), 423

² *Ibid*, 444

³ *Ibid*, 604, 605

⁴ *Ibid*, 630

⁵ *Ibid*, 663

⁶ *Ibid*, 688

⁷ *Later Correspondence of George III*, Vol. 2, ed. A. Aspinall (Cambridge University Press, 1963), 6

⁸ *Ibid*, 8

⁹ *Ibid*, 36

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 186

¹¹ *Ibid*, 189

¹² *Ibid*, 342

¹³ *Ibid*, 427

¹⁴ *Lady Holland to Her Son, 1821-1845*, ed. the Earl of Ilchester (London: John Murray, 1946), 109

¹⁵ *Charles James Fox*, John Drinkwater (London: Ernest Benn, 1928), 7

¹⁶ *John Cowper Powys Letters to His Brother Llewelyn*, Vol. 2, ed. Malcolm Elwin (London: Village Press, 1975), 72

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 80

¹⁸ *Diary of John Cowper Powys*, ed. Frederick Davies (London: Greymitre Books, 1987), 137

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 138

²⁰ *Autobiography*, John Cowper Powys (London: Picador, 1967), 599

²¹ *Ibid*, 600

A query

Warwick Gurney Powys, John Cowper Powys's third cousin mentioned on the opposite page, was born on 7 January 1872 (see the family tree on page 9).

Does anyone know when he died?

Reviews

John Cowper Powys' Elementalismus. Eine Lebensphilosophie by Henning Ahrens

(Leipziger Schriften zur Kultur-, Literatur-, Sprach-
und Übersetzungswissenschaft, 4)

Frankfurt am Main: Vevuert, 1997. 251pp.

'It's all one song,' says Neil Young at the beginning of his 1997 live CD, and the music is the proof. 'It's all one book,' John Cowper Powys might have said of his life's work, and he might have been even more inclined to say this of his philosophical, or taking Henning Ahrens' lead, his elemental books. Repetition need not be a weakness, if the material is good, a Neil Young fan might say. Repetition also has a pragmatic value not to be underestimated when it comes to Powys the propagandist, the preacher. His philosophical works were not intended to be collected and studied as a whole, but each to be read by whoever may have been interested in Powys's guide to good living at the time. Henning Ahrens has, of course, read them all and he offers a first really comprehensive study of the elemental philosophy of John Cowper Powys. There is development over the decades, but repetition remains the stronger force. Ahrens' study highlights the development and it also mimics the repetition in Powys's philosophy, becoming repetitive itself. But see above, that need not be a weakness.

Ahrens' book is written in German and was a doctoral thesis. Its tone is rarely purely academic; often it is nearly poetic. Ahrens does not come at Powys with any pre-conceived theoretical or – heaven forbid! – political framework. His method is emphatic, and as such strikingly similar to what Ahrens himself perceives to be the cornerstone to Powys's philosophy: an emphatic immersion in the object which respects the otherness of that object as subject. This method is not quite the same as close reading, just as Powys's own 'dithyrambic analysis' style of criticism is always too subjective and idiosyncratic to be close reading. The German which Ahrens uses to define Powys's dealing with the elements is *Versenkung*, and it carries far more implication than any one English word can. *Versenkung* is contemplation, it is empathy, it is immersion, and it is also a sinking, a lowering of oneself down into the depths of the material elemental world. This, we know, is Powys's art of happiness, as he practised and investigated it from *The Complex Vision* (1920) to *In Spite Of* (1953). Ahrens devotes a section of his book to each of the major elemental (philosophical) works of this long period. The development he finds is that which led Powys to cut away abstraction, as he became more and more pragmatic, and also discard the idea of 'premeditated ecstasy'. From the mid-thirties onwards ecstasy was more a product of chance than of intention, and none the less the happiness to be derived from enjoying the elements remains a constant in Powys's thinking.

Ahrens looks at Powys as a modern, and concludes that his work was a reaction to modernism, but not reactionary. Ahrens highlights links between the elemental writings and Powys's novels (mainly *Wolf Solent* and *A Glastonbury Romance*), and, although it would have redefined the brief of a study devoted to the philosophy, more of this would have made interesting reading. And Ahrens delicately – and repeatedly – assesses Powys's relationship to mysticism. The conclusion is that Powys's work does retain the vestiges of mysticism, but in an imminent non-transcendent form. It is the consistent idea of the salvation in the moment of elemental *Versenkung* which makes the near-mystic of Powys; the elemental, however, for all the sense of tradition which perceiving it can establish, remains in the tellurian here and now. Other important aspects of Powys's sublime rambling thought patterns are investigated: the poetic, the role of ritual and prayer, Powys's profane polytheism and his attitude to Christianity. The latter, Ahrens argues, is of value for Powys only as an imaginative ritual, and yet, considering the wealth of Christian imagery in books such as *In Defence of Sensuality* and *A Glastonbury Romance*, here, I feel, is one moment when Ahrens only really manages to scratch the surface. But this does not really matter – whether it be the poetic, the fine distinctions between the various stages of ecstasy or Powys's vision of a new age (so beautifully ironised in the figure of Johnny Geard in *A Glastonbury Romance*): it's all one song.

And because it's all one song the second major part of Ahrens' book is endangered. Having dealt with each philosophical work, Ahrens takes Taliessin's song from *Porius* and subjects it to an elemental interpretation. The interpretation is thorough (more so than Ahrens' recent article on the subject in *The Powys Journal* vii), it is full of insight, but the conclusion is necessarily devoid of all surprises: Taliessin is Powys's arch-elementalist, and his song the most concentrated example of elemental practice. I strongly recommend readers to consider this study as consisting of two parts, each to be read independently, for otherwise Ahrens' excellent analysis of the central part of *Porius* may go under, immersed in all the – repetition. For most readers of John Cowper Powys to have the chance of fishing Ahrens' insight out again, though, a translation into English is required.

There are two things left to say. Firstly, for both readers who know Powys's work well and those who do not, Henning Ahrens has brought practical elementalism alive, and he leaves not only a clearer impression as to what made John Cowper Powys tick, but also an open question as to what to make of elementalism today. Secondly, given that Powys again and again claimed that happiness was to be found in contemplation of the elements, it remains a mystery why he wrote so much, and how he found the time to do so. This is a paradox which has the potential of taking elementalism by the throat, but that would not have particularly disturbed John Cowper Powys. For, as Ahrens says, elementalism is never equated with stasis, but is always on the move.

Greg Bond

The Last Voyage and Other Stories
by James Hanley
London: The Harvill Press, 1997. 272 pp. £9.99

JCP was still living in New York and coming to the end of his long lecturing career, but had just published *Wolf Solent* and spent his first holiday at Hillsdale, when the young James Hanley first wrote to him in the fall of 1929. Hanley was then an unknown and unpublished writer, living with his wife Timothy in a tiny cottage in a remote Welsh village. Their backgrounds and experience could not have been more different, yet from this first exchange grew a correspondence and a close friendship which was to last until JCP's death in 1963. It was to be Hanley who helped find the house at 7 Cae Coed in Corwen, close to where he and Tim were then living at Llanfechain, which was to be home to JCP and Phyllis from 1935 until 1954 when they moved to Blaenau Ffestiniog. But long before this it was probably Hanley who had the greater contemporary literary reputation, although a reputation that failed to maintain its original promise. It is an irony they would appreciate that both are now equally out of print.

The failure to recognise Hanley (and Powys) as one of our most original twentieth-century writers remains a continuing enigma. Born in Dublin in 1901 and brought up in Liverpool, he went to sea as a boy sailor, jumping ship in New Brunswick to enlist and fight with the Canadian Expeditionary Forces through the last years of the Great War. Afterwards he returned to Liverpool and the merchant navy. These experiences, together with his great passion for music, form the essential base metal from which he forged his early stories when he first began to write in the mid-1920s. But despite initial difficulties in finding a publisher, from the appearance of his first novel *Drift* in 1930 until his death in 1985, he received consistent critical acclaim, if not always great empathy for his approach. Even now, every half decade or so, some distinguished critic attempts to resurrect Hanley, whilst a long series of publishers similarly struggled to keep his best work in print, not least André Deutsch, who published all of the magnificent later novels, and reissued a number of earlier books. But to little avail, with consistently low sales, despite excellent reviews.

Harvill have now added their name to this distinguished list, with a well-produced re-issue of five early novellas now long out of print. With an excellent sympathetic introduction by Alan Ross, and a cover design by Hanley's son Liam (who was also JCP's godson), this is a timely reminder of the power of Hanley's early work as we approach the centenary of his birth, and a welcome opportunity to reassess his unique style. 'The Last Voyage', the first story in this collection, with its horrifically violent ending, is quintessential Hanley, about an old stoker forced to retire from the sea through old age and injury after 20 years in the same ship, and introduces many of the themes he was to explore throughout his fiction. Themes echoed again in this collection in 'Narrative' and 'Greaser Anderson'. In

an introduction to the 1931 edition, Richard Aldington noted that 'the story of the Last Voyage is a terrible and saddening one, but we are merely cowards if we refuse to face the grimness and the unhappiness. Beneath the violence and harshness and crudity of his words there is a profound pity and aspiration.'

Just so. And it is this pity that suffuses so much of Hanley's work, as he describes the endless futile monotony of the harsh working lives of those who labour to support the whole material edifice of civilised society. Much of the world that Hanley describes so remorselessly has mercifully long since disappeared, but the questions he asks us to confront about the nature of the relationships between man and society, and between men and women, remain as valid today as they ever were, and are perhaps more easily grasped in an age when the history of the exploitation of labour is more widely appreciated, and we are perhaps less easily shocked by descriptions of the brutalities by which people lived. Whilst the questions he confronts are inevitably political, it would be a mistake to think of Hanley as a political writer, for his stories are framed within a context that requires us to evaluate our own response about the compromises we all make, and the way that we live our own lives, rather than in the more comfortable organisational solutions of social or political theory.

'The German Prisoner' is one of the great lost stories of the First World War, exploring the harsh realities of trench warfare from the uncomprehending perspective of two young soldiers trapped in no-mans-land during an infantry attack, written long before such realistic portrayal of war became acceptable. Even now it is not a pleasant story, and appeared only in a privately printed limited edition in 1930, remaining out of print until republished in *London Magazine* only in 1996.

Hanley's characters are invariably confronted by grim choices, but they live for us because we are able to believe in them as people and so must suffer with them. It is this starkness that perhaps begins to explain the lack of a general public recognition of Hanley's work. He is rarely an easy read, and can often be bleakly pessimistic. But it is an approach entirely suited to his material. As JCP noted in his enthusiastic introduction to Hanley's first volume of stories *Men in Darkness* (1931), from which two of these pieces are taken, 'these stories are at their best in those passages where the grey monotones of the waves of life, flowing and ebbing, ebbing and flowing, convey that weary hopelessness of toil without recompense, of labour without reward, to endure which in defiant patience requires an heroic stoicism beyond anything practised or taught by Marcus Aurelius!'

This remarkable stoicism can perhaps best be seen in Hanley's massive 5-volume sequence *The Furies*, published between 1935 and 1958, which is Dostoevskian in its power and penetration, but as Alan Ross remarks in his introduction to this collection: 'His impressive gifts of concentration, his dramatic skill, his poetic energy, work best in stories, as here, and in the short novel, when his compassion and anguish, pared down to the bone, create an often

sublime intensity.' Yes. And some of the prose still seems to burn from the page. These early stories contain none of the subtlety of technique Hanley was later to develop, but they have all the naked force of that piercing shriek in the dark that signals a new voice and a new vision. Half a century later these early stories have lost none of their power.

Towards the end of his life Hanley always claimed his fictions were composed like music, and it is true that in his best work, like his contemporaries Joyce and Beckett, he is able to make words reverberate in the mind and create patterns and sensations beyond those of language itself. Perhaps that is why in later life he was so much more successful as a radio (and later TV) dramatist than as a novelist. But in these stories the swell of that tide is already beginning to make itself felt, and Harvill are to be congratulated on bringing out this powerful collection. One can only hope their faith is justified with sufficient sales to encourage them to reissue yet more of Hanley's remarkable work.

Chris Gostick

What They Said About the Powyses

We have all come across references to the Powyses in the most unexpected places. Joan Stevens has sent me the following extracts and I hope that other readers will let me have their discoveries for a new feature. Ed.

Edith Sitwell, *Selected Letters*

'I am ... rather bored and too tired to begin anything fresh. So bored that I have been reduced to reading *Wolf Solent* which was lent me by kind Mr. Eddie Marsh. There is a great big primitive experience! I suppose that the Messrs Powys were the first writers who experimented in deliberately boring their readers, and if so, I must admit that this particular brother is wholly successful. Also there is a curious film of dirtiness over the whole book, which one can't explain. I am sure that as a boy he never washed his hands, but drank ink and kept mice in his pockets ...' (Dec. 1935)

Kay Boyle, *Words That Must Somehow Be Said*

(Her Mother in New York invited JCP to dinner especially to meet an admirer.)
'Mother had planned the dinner with special care: there would be cream of artichoke soup, followed by a great broiled salmon surrounded by miniature snowballs of new potatoes sprinkled with bright parsley ... and when the white wine had been poured and the beautiful salmon passed first to Mother and then to the guest of honour, Powys said, "I think I'll wait for the meat course ..." In future years Mother would tell friends about it and even laugh, but on that evening it was close to tragedy ...'

(Kay Boyle was born 1902, American expatriate writer and journalist in Paris 1920s.)

John Bunyan 1628 – 1688, T. F. Powys

We may well believe that John Bunyan would have been mildly astonished had he been told in his lifetime that the little family his hero Christian left behind in the City of Destruction, to watch his adventures, would grow to be nearly the whole population of the world. But a man who was bold enough to say that he was never out of the Bible, was certainly not the one to remain for ever in a steeple house doorway when one of John Bunyan's chief pleasures was to ring the bells. Had John's pleasures been grand and expensive he might have let them go with little trouble and less pain, but to leave off playing cat upon a Sunday and dancing upon the green and a dreadful oath now and again to let the maidens know that a man was about was another matter. And then – during the game – 'a voice did suddenly dart at me from heaven into my soul, which said, Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven, or have thy sins and go to hell?' Soon after this vision a woman, who herself was very loose and ungodly, chid him for swearing, and Bunyan was very naturally impressed by such a scolding.

His behaviour changed. 'Now I was, they said, become Godly; now I was become a right honest man ... For then I thought I pleased God as well as any man in England.'

And so the tinker soldered kettles for a while working modestly at his trade and proud to be spoken of as a religious man.

But whoever has courage enough to give up playing cat isn't likely to remain all his life a poor painted hypocrite.

And then upon a day, a very lucky day for us all, Bunyan went to Bedford to work at his calling, 'and in one of the streets of that town I came where there were three or four poor women sitting at a door, in the sun, talking about the things of God.'

'At this I felt my own heart began to shake ... How gladly would I have been any thing but myself. Any thing but a man! and in any condition but my own.'

God's ways are not ours, and now in order that Pilgrim's Progress should be written, it was considered necessary that a den should be found for John. This den was Bedford jail.

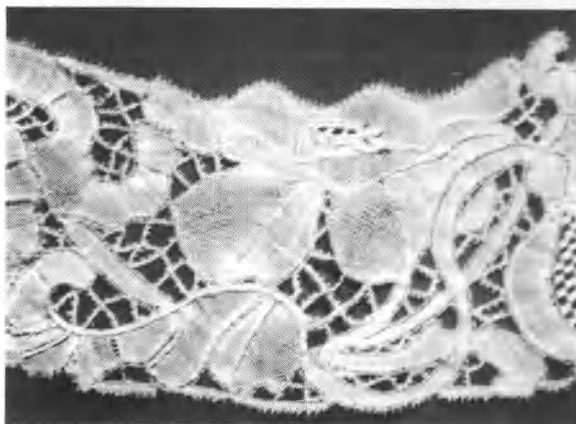
Here it was that those Holy Virgins made such mighty music with their harps of gold, that it was a joyful thing and his soul's supreme pleasure to be cut in pieces, eaten of beasts, drowned in the seas, for the love of our Lord ... I like to think, and I believe that someone has suggested it, that John Bunyan came of Gipsy stock, and if this is so one can well understand the pleasure that he had when although confined by bars and bolts himself he started Christian off on his long journey.

There is more downright honest English humour in Bunyan than any other writer. Hear this from the Holy War, an excellent book for those who cannot sleep in the night – 'Mr Anything became a brisk man in the broil; but both sides were against him, because he was true to none. He had for his malapertness, one of his

legs broken, and he that did it wished it had been his neck.’ – Diabolus was certainly a very excellent general and knew how to talk to his soldiers – ‘What ! cry for quarter, never do that if you would be mine; I know you are stout men, and am sure that I have clad you with that which is armour of proof; ... besides all this, I have a maul, fire brands, arrows and death, all good hand weapons and such as will do execution. And see next how poor Mansoul is filled with traitors.’ Now every corner swarmed with outlandish doubters; red coats and black coats walked the town by clusters, and filled all the houses with hideous noises, vain songs, lying stories, and blasphemous language against Shaddai and his son. But Shaddai still loves the city – ‘Oh my child of Mansoul, I love thee and bear thee upon my heart for ever ...’

Amongst all Bunyan’s children, I take the greatest pleasure in Mr. Fearing who lay roaring at the Slough of Despond for about a month together, stumbled at any straw that anybody cast in his way, and was far more afraid of pretty damsels than of the horrid lions. This honest man was wont to hide behind the screen to over hear good talk, and when he went down into the Valley of Humiliation – ‘Here he would lie down, embrace the ground, and kiss the very flowers that grew in this valley.’ But when he came to that other valley, so Great-heart tells the story – ‘the Valley of the Shadow, I thought I should have lost my man ... “the hobgoblins will have me!” cried he, and I could not beat him out on it.’ And so Mr. Fearing reached the final river, though he did not go through singing as did Mr. Despondency’s daughter, yet he went over at last, not much above wet-shod.

Taken from Great Names, an Anthology of English and American Literature from Chaucer to Francis Tompson, with introductions by various hands. Editor Walter J. Turner (New York: The Dial Press, 1926). (There are two incomplete manuscript drafts of this introduction in the Society’s Bissell Collection.)



Example of Honiton bobbin lace designed and made by Marian Powys (also on page 23).

Keeping Lace Vibrantly Alive: A Tribute to Marian Powys.

The love of lace is a rare thing; like genius it strikes out of the unknown on certain beings, chosen ones, irrespective of sex, country or class. Genius brings with it responsibility, struggle, stress and sometimes despair, but the love of lace brings with it healing, tranquillity and serenity. Yet this peculiar passion has also the power of intensifying the interest of life, demanding perfection and still greater beauty and greater understanding of the beloved art. In search of these things the devoted one may travel far and see many grand and beautiful countries and many distinguished and historical personages. Should the cost of these journeys be too great, the study of lace will carry the student vicariously away to these lovely places through books and pictures.

Marian Powys, *Lace and Lace Making* (1953), Ch. 1.

Lace was a passport to a remarkable life for Marian Powys. Born in Queen Victoria's England in 1882 to a country vicar and a poetic mother, she almost certainly would have lived a neatly defined life pottering with her garden in an English west-country village, a frustrated heroine in a Jane Austen novel. Lace provided the opportunity to escape to New York's Greenwich Village, and to invent a life F. Scott Fitzgerald might have penned, dotted with deposed royalty, including Hapsburgs, Bourbons, and Romanovs; captains of industry including Blumenthals, Rockefellers, and Huttons; literary and theatrical figures including Theodore Dreiser and Isadora Duncan.

Her passion until her death in 1972 at the age of 89 was to keep lace vibrantly alive, almost as if she were paying it back for the fascinating life it provided for her. She designed and made modern lace, and repaired, remodelled, bought and sold, wrote and lectured about antique lace. The legacy of lace she designed and made includes fans, collars, and small veils with motifs ranging from the deer, mice, and bats that roamed near her Hudson Valley home to cloud-hopping biplanes honouring Charles Lindbergh. The best of her handmade lace is now scattered and largely lost among museums and private collections. Her remarkable philosophy for designing, making, and living with lace, however, still speaks to us today in her book, *Lace and Lace Making*.

Hers is a story that could only have happened at a unique time, when collecting antique lace was as fashionable to high society as collecting Rembrandt or Van Gogh is today, and when European royalty was selling off the laces of Queen Elizabeth I and Napoleon to stay afloat. It could only happen in a unique set of places, and with the background of a family as remarkable if not as powerful as the Kennedys.

Marian Powys was born in Dorchester, in south-west England barely thirty miles from Honiton, the legendary centre of a region famed for lacemaking. Her father, Charles Francis Powys, instilled a love of nature and deep religious

feelings. Her mother, Mary Cowper Powys, was a descendent of William Cowper, an eighteenth-century English poet. Each of her siblings was to become an achiever as extraordinary as Marian. Three brothers, John Cowper, Theodore Francis, and Llewelyn, and a sister Philippa, were writers. The eldest sister, Gertrude, was a painter. Other brothers included Albert, an architect honoured by King George V; Littleton, headmaster of a respected preparatory school; and William, a sheep farmer in Kenya, one of the first English colonists to advocate Kenyan independence.

They were growing up when Victorian conventions still held sway. Boys would be sent off to the university to prepare them for careers and broad, exciting lives. The girls would marry, and lead lives prescribed by their husbands, or they would stay at home. Turn-of-the-century authors like Nietzsche, Ibsen, and a dozen others were giving young women like Marian ideas of freedom and lives of their own. Step by innocuous step, she planned an education that would carry her off on her own adventures. Learning to make lace was the first step. Years later she would say she immediately saw in lacemaking 'an outlet and an escape from the home life.' Best of all, it was a completely acceptable activity for a young lady. Eyebrows in her conservative upper class family went up however, when she taught herself typing and shorthand.

'Profound' is the word her son Peter (Powys Grey) used to describe the education she eventually acquired. Her birthplace made it logical to learn the lace techniques and history of Honiton, Bath, Buckinghamshire, and Norfolk, the most notable lace regions of England. Art also was an acceptable field of study for a young lady, and as she studied at the Yeovil School of Art, new movements such as Art Nouveau and the William Morris Arts and Crafts period encouraged as much free thinking in design as Nietzsche was encouraging in philosophy.

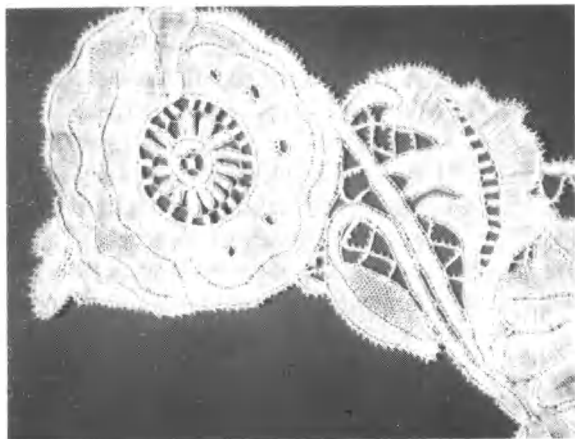
When she was in her twenties, she pushed off for the continent, financed surreptitiously by her aunt Kate, sympathetic to Marian's dream of living a life bigger and wider than that offered in rural England. Her home studies of French, Italian, and German made it possible to study and absorb art, drawing and design, art history, and lacemaking and lace history across the continent. She studied all the classics, and her knowledge of myths and legends, poetic figures, and historic figures allowed her to read and understand the figures and stories woven and stitched into centuries old laces.

Travelling and studying on the European continent in the years immediately before World War I, when petty German and Italian kingdoms and duchies were consolidating into empires, undoubtedly gave this young woman a special perspective. Years later, when clients such as Eleanor and her mother-in-law Sarah Roosevelt would call at her Manhattan shop, Powys would be poised, knowledgeable, and ready.

Her older brother John Cowper ultimately provided the escape opportunity, and the milieu that allowed Marian to establish her uniquely successful life as a

champion of lace. By 1910, he had become successful in the United States on the Chautauqua lecture circuit. Under the pretext of taking care of this unmarried older brother, Marian was encouraged to set sail for New York City. Again, this was an innocuous move with fascinating undertones: taking care of family was an acceptable life for an unmarried lady. The place, however, was Greenwich Village. The time was 1913, and the literary brother's circle of friends and acquaintances included Isadora Duncan, Theodore Dreiser, Clarence Darrow, Edna St Vincent Millay, E. E. Cummings, Bertrand Russell and the rest of the Greenwich Village avant-garde.

Three years later Marian had established her own reputation as a lace expert by winning a medal for lace design at a San Francisco exhibition, and was



lecturing on antique lace and lace history in New York City. The lively circle of friends with whom she and her brother John associated encouraged Marian to open her own shop in Manhattan to trade in antique laces, and to provide eagerly sought services to repair and restore old treasures.

The first years of her Devonshire Lace Shop were heady times. Friends like Isadora Duncan quickly helped build a glittering clientele. Buyers of antique lace included American industrial royalty: Morgans, Fricks, Flaglers, Rockefellers, Fahnstocks, Blumenthals, Morrows, Whitneys, Roosevelts. Sellers included the Vatican, Bourbons, the Sultan of Turkey, and Prince Yousepov, husband of the niece of Tzar Nicholas and assassin of Rasputin.

Veils, shawls, flounces, collars, altar fronts and priests' albs all appeared at her shop, sometimes carried by penniless offspring of the royalty that commissioned them decades or centuries earlier, other times by offspring of wartime palace looters. Years studying art, history, and the classics in Europe were paying off. They allowed Powys to recognize the symbolism in the royal veils, and know them for what they were. She dramatically marketed these pieces, often having them photographed to appeal to the ego and vanity of her monied clientele. Fully knowing the pedigree of the piece, she had Napoleon's Alençon needle lace bedspread (his favourite bees and Josephine's favourite lilies stitched into a fine ground) photographed on a model as a bride's veil.

Trade in antique lace and interest in lacemaking survived the Great Depression of the 1930s, and lace collecting and Marian Powys were celebrated in a

dozen-page article in *Fortune* magazine in 1933. World War II however, was a catastrophe. Lace collections worth millions suddenly had no takers. Many collections disappeared into museums, such as Flagler's in Florida. Others disappeared into attics and closets. Powys closed the Devonshire Lace Shop in 1945, but continued to lecture, write, and crusade to lift the 'cold winter of benign neglect' that overtook antique lace. Her 1953 book, *Lace and Lace Making*, was a desperate attempt to resurrect interest in lace. In this book, Powys pours out her passion for old lace. Her personality, her heritage, the depth of her education and of her commitment to old lace all are revealed in its chapters. We especially see the strong influence of her ancestor, poet William Cowper, in her words on the designs and making of lace.

In his poem, 'The Winter Evening', Cowper writes of lace 'Here the needle plies its busy task; the pattern grows, the well depicted flower, ... a wreath that cannot fade, of flowers that blow with most success when all besides decay.' Powys writes, in *Lace and Lace Making*, 'The love of flowers is universal ... But the weather is often cold, no flowers blooming. In the glittering city one single flower, a little faded, will cost a dollar, many flowers a week's living. Whereas in lace, there are all the flowers, flowers which do not fade, roses, carnations, lilies, forget-me-nots, ...' She rapturises over the beauty of pure, white lace: '... those soft creamy flowers, which makes the gay coloured flowers of embroidery and textiles seem almost loud and garish and too imitative of the real. The whiteness of lace has a special beauty, like shadows of branches on snow or great white birds moving in deep foliage.'

She describes a demanding, precise technique for designing lace, based on her own rigorous training in art and drawing. 'A pattern for lace must have clean lines, exquisite proportions, and a fine sense of fitness and economy; but there must be more than that. There must be imagination and human sensibility. At times, a design may even have a touch of something beyond the lines, an illumination, an inspiration.' By any means, lace design and lace making were to remain vital and alive. 'If the art of lace is to hold its high place it must submit to the process of evolution and express in new and original forms the spirit of our own age.' Undoubtedly, she would have embraced the new technologies of photocopy machines, and computer-aided design. Take your favourite pieces of antique lace to a Xerox machine, copy them, cut, rearrange and paste, and create new designs. Use those computers; play with designs!

To the very end of her life, Powys never stopped trying to encourage others to lead lives as exotic and daring as her own, and often used lace as a metaphor for life. Past her moss-covered gate, up the crooked path past her beloved gardens overgrown with weeds, neighbourhood children would come for tea and tales. Inside her ramshackle house on the Hudson '... held together only because Marian had cast a spell on it', a wash boiler with a century old piece of lace in soapy water might be bubbling on the old wood stove along with the tea kettle.

Tea was served in a silver teapot, with ginger biscuits, squares of bread with butter and jam on little silver trays, and sunflower seeds from a tarnished silver dish shaped like a gardening basket.

After tea, they would go a few steps up to the sitting room. In a Victorian English accent never tainted by the arch tones of the BBC, Marian might read Robert Louis Stevenson, the King James Bible, or *Westward Ho!* One of the children would fashion a bookmark for her out of her Player's cigarette wrappers while she would transport them to Venice for a turn-of-the century gondola ride, and other wonderful places 'where grown-ups had done extraordinary things'. She would show children lace panels with mythological scenes designed by the eighteenth-century artist David, and transport them from the lacemaker's cottage to royal palaces where kings and princesses decked themselves with yards and yards of priceless lace.

As generation after generation was no longer exposed to lace, Powys knew even the collections in museums would be lost and forgotten. Marian Powys, even today would urge us to bring our lace out of the closet and enjoy it, and to urge our local museums to do the same, because more lace is lost to neglect than to use. 'There is a general idea that pearls are more alive and glowing when worn and enjoyed than when put away in jewel cases and dark places. The same applies to lace. Anything would rather suffer from wear and tear than from gradual disintegration in the dark.'

Elizabeth M. Kurella

ABOUT THE AUTHOR Elizabeth M. Kurella is American. She has published *The Secrets of Real Lace* (ISBN 0-964871-0-2) and *A Pocket Guide to Valuable Old Lace and Lacy Linens* (ISBN 0-964871-1-0). She publishes *The Old Lace and Linen Merchant*, a quarterly newsletter devoted to encouraging use of antique lace and linens.

With thanks to Catherine Philippa Powys Grey, granddaughter of Marian Powys, for making the family archives available for research.

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To Ezra Pound

Always upon the right side of the fray
Always upon the good side 'gainst the evil
Always defending God against the devil
Always upholding Now 'gainst Yesterday
The commonplace is ever his loathed prey
Eating false Laurel foliage like a weevil
Blasting false Helicons to make 'em level
He is the one to make the bastards pay
Toll to the true inheritors of glory.
For himself he does not care if he has any !
He does not give a damn! For he has found
His true account; his place in History;
The Muses' champion! Not for Caesar's Penny
Will we renounce our Pound, our Pound, our Pound!

*Unpublished manuscript sonnet by John Cowper Powys
from the Manuscript Collection at the Capen Hall Library State
University of New York Buffalo. The University of Buffalo file reference
is B359F17A and carries the following annotation: 'John Cowper
Powys to Ezra Pound. Original unpublished mss poem. Not dated, but
c.1920.' (Contributed by Chris Gostick.)*

*Note: Line 10 was originally: 'But when it comes to his own
satisfaction', but this has been crossed through and replaced as
above. There are also some unreadable erasures and crossings
out before the final two lines.*

Letters to the Editor

A Writer's Dorset: A Correction and Amplification

Charles Lock writes: Roger Peers has drawn my attention to an error in my contribution to *Newsletter* 32, page 22. There I state that Hardy's study and its contents were given to the Dorset County Museum by his sister Kate. This is quite wrong: Hardy's study, together with the Thomas Hardy Memorial Collection, was bequeathed to the Museum by his widow, Florence Emily Hardy, on her death in 1937.

My next sentence reads (correctly, if elliptically): 'Thus the materials were separated from Hardy's house, Max Gate, which was given as an empty shell to the nation.' When Max Gate was put on the market, by the executors of Florence Hardy's estate, it was purchased by Kate Hardy, who then donated it to the National Trust. Hence the unusual separation of the writer's house from its contents, and the disconcerting presence in a literary collection of not only books and papers but also things; and the very space which contains those things, the room that houses them. Florence's instructions for the setting up of Hardy's study within the Museum were carried out by her literary executor, Irene Cooper Willis, with the assistance of the Museum's Curator, Lt.-Col. Charles Drew. The Thomas Hardy Memorial Collection was officially opened at the Dorset County Museum in 1940, by Kate Hardy.

Opportunity Lost.

John Cowper Powys by Herbert Williams, Seren Books, 1997.

Considering the parlous state of John Cowper Powys books in print, I wonder if the author of this slim introduction to his life and works might have served the great man's cause rather better had he been just a little more enthusiastic in praise of what Powys did achieve as a writer, and had concentrated less on his supposed failings, both in his writing and in his private life.

Of course, no one wants a blinkered hagiography, but I couldn't help feeling, even after reading the upbeat last paragraph of the postscript of Mr William's book, that by then it was too late, and he might have turned more people away from venturing into the Powys world, than otherwise.

Though Mr Williams has many good qualities apt for his subject – conciseness and a sound common sense, chief among them – it seems then a pity that at times the writing (or perhaps the revising of the writing?) should show signs of carelessness. Why, for instance, are the same ten lines from Chapter 3 of *A Glastonbury Romance* quoted and reproduced twice? On page 16 of his book Mr Williams tells us, reasonably enough, that the strange passions of Owen Evans were almost certainly autobiographical; why then repeat much the same

observation on page 102? Similarly, Powys's abrupt remark to Glyn Hughes of his 'horror of fucking' is quoted twice, to no better purpose the second time than the first.

I have no objection to revelations of a personal nature – indeed, books of this sort are all the poorer, and duller, for steering clear of this sort of controversy – and no biographer, of course, could surely tell us more about Powys than he has already told us about himself in the *Autobiography*; but with such a modest scope within which to work – not much more than a hundred and fifty pages – perhaps a little more space might have been given over to the works rather than the life.

True, Mr Williams comes down firmly on Powys's side in some cases: rightly saying of *A Glastonbury Romance* '... there is a good case to be made for ranking it among the great novels of the twentieth century'. Then Mr Williams immediately disappoints by making no attempt himself to say why this may be so.

As it happens, and not surprisingly, I fully agree with him, and for this reason above all others: superficially *A Glastonbury Romance* resembles something like, say *War and Peace* in its size and scope; but whereas on reading the latter it is Tolstoy's *depth* that most impresses, when reading Powys's novel it is, uniquely I think, his *breadth* of approach that more than anything else stands out. For want of a better word, there is a *broadness* about the best of Powys's work, a breathtaking broadness of feeling and expression that is quite unlike the work of anyone else. Where Tolstoy's genius can take twenty years of European history and make it seem like an instant, the genius of John Cowper Powys can take an instant and make it seem to last forever.

To return to the book under discussion. Mr Williams rightly gives a reasonable mention to the middle-period novels – from *Wolf Solent* through to *Owen Glendower* and *Porius* – and it is good to see the early novels, including the posthumously published *After My Fashion*, not being ignored (and I am sure Mr Williams's description of the ending of *Rodmoor*, with Philippa tying herself to Adam's corpse and plunging into the sea, as 'absurd' is fair – not having read this novel, I cannot say – though I do wonder in passing, if Powys knew Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea*, the ending of which has the hero sitting stoically on a rock as the high tide comes in to engulf him?); but for the nothing less than astonishing sequence of late works – from *The Inmates* to *All or Nothing* and the other fantasies, and all written in his eighties, don't forget – to get barely a mention and little comment, is, I believe, a miscalculation. Far from showing any great falling off in Powys's abilities, these late books, while not overshadowing the earlier, greater works, are one of the finest achievements of English literature from the middle years of this century; they are a triumphant testament to the enduring power of the human imagination to overcome many things – neglect, ill-health, ridicule and poverty among them.

In addition, I think a number of these late works – *Atlantis*, *The Brazen Head*, and so on – with their relative brevity and sense of freedom from constraint,

might be recommended to new readers daunted by the denseness and complexity of some of the earlier novels.

Lack of mention of these books can almost certainly be laid at the door of what is, from the outset, a central intention of Mr Williams's book, but is nevertheless a central failing also: namely its stress on John Cowper Powys as a Welsh, or Wales-inspired writer. In many ways there is nothing wrong with stressing this: Powys himself made much of his roots, as he saw them, why then shouldn't a biographer? But with this book being published in the 'Border Lines' series, under the aegis of Poetry Wales Press, one can't help feeling Powys has somehow been moulded to fit the series rather than the series tailored to fit Powys. For what it is worth, I regard Powys as an English novelist, through and through; an English novelist who, amongst his many books, wrote two magnificent Welsh-based historical novels. But Powys's earlier novels are no more a leading-up to those two historical novels, than the later books are a let-down after those two mighty works; and to say, suggest or imply as much suggests a narrowness of vision. With the Welsh angle forever in his sights, Mr Williams clearly thought there was no need to dwell on the later books; though after all, they too were written in Wales, for all their Welshness they might as well have been written on the moon.

Any book on John Cowper Powys is to be welcomed; by the very nature of its subject, it can't fail to be fascinating to any but the most prejudiced reader. And despite the one or two shortcomings I have discussed, Mr Williams's book deserves to be widely read for its own qualities, and as another stone in the foundation of building something lasting in appreciation of the achievement of John Cowper Powys.

Barry Cronin

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Subscriptions are due on January 1st each year as follows: UK members £13.50, overseas members £16, and student members £6.

Most members have paid for 1998, but quite a lot still have not. If the subscription is not paid you will not receive *The Powys Journal*, nor (under the terms of our Constitution) may you propose or second candidates for elections, nor may you vote or be nominated.

**If you have a reminder tucked into your *Newsletter*,
please pay promptly.**

Incest in Porius

Prominent among the many mythical figures who populate the background of John Cowper Powys's *Porius* is the magician demigod Gwydion ap Don. It was Gwydion who created the maiden Blodeuwedd and subsequently transformed her into an owl – a part of the fictive background that merges into the foreground in Chapter 32 of the novel, when another magician, Myrddin Wyllt, restores Blodeuwedd to human form (see Patricia Dawson's cover etchings).

From the Henog of Dyfed, who detests Gwydion as a malign god of the north, we learn that Gwydion and his sister Arianrod were 'the incestuous spawn of that Gwyddyliad [Irish] Succubus Don [their mother,] and moreover, that Llew Llaw Gyffes, the husband to whom Blodeuwedd was unfaithful, was Gwydion and Arianrod's incestuous 'sub-human whelp' (773).¹ Here Powys follows the medieval collection of Welsh folk tales known as the *Mabinogion*, in which Gwydion also participated in another, more bizarre, incestuous relationship that will be referred to below.

Other episodes of incest in the mythical background of the novel involve Cronos, the God of the pre-Olympian Golden Age, and hence his avatar, Myrddin Wyllt, who is one of the novel's principal characters. Cronos, a Titan, was the incestuous son of the earth-mother, Ge, by her son, Uranus. Cronos in turn married his Titaness sister Rhea, who, aided by Ge, hid their incestuous son Zeus, 'the Olympian', on the island of Crete to prevent Cronos from devouring him as he had their other children. Cronos's overthrow of his father Uranus, his relationship with his mother, and his overthrow by Zeus are themes sounded again and again in the novel (for example, pp. 294–8).

Incest in *Porius* is by no means confined to the novel's mythical background. In Chapter 9, Porius accompanies his father Einion, the reigning Prince of Edeyrnion, to a night meeting with Medrawd, King Arthur's sinister nephew. On learning that his father has ordered an old family retainer, Afagddu, to escort Medrawd through the forest, Porius asks Einion to provide Afagddu with some token sufficient to prove that he is indeed acting on the Prince's orders. When Einion proceeds to fumble beneath his shirt for a necklace to give Afagddu, Porius 'knew what this fumbling implied, for it was common knowledge at the Gaer that their chief wore more than one love-token about his neck.' The necklace that Einion decides to give Afagddu is a silver one given him by his brother Brochvael's deceased wife, Kymeinvoll. The other necklace, of gold, which he calls 'the unlucky one', came from his deceased sister, Alarch the Fair (146–7).

We hear no more of Einion's relationship with Alarch, and many passages in the novel make it plain that Alarch's only child, Porius's cousin Rhun, is indeed the child of her husband Agenor. However, it is striking that Alarch was Porius's foster-mother and wet nurse, and that Porius feels bound to her by emotional ties far stronger than any which bind him to his own mother, Euronwy. It is as though,

for Alarch, young Porius served as a proxy for an incestuous love-child of Einion.

In consequence of Einion's liaison with Kymeinvoll, on the other hand, there is serious doubt as to the paternity of her daughter Morfydd, Porius's fiancée, and later, wife. Musing upon the matter of the two necklaces, Porius asks himself, 'What then if Morfydd were his half-sister?' His response – 'He was neither shocked by this idea nor ashamed of not being shocked. He had brooded on this dark and riddling speculation ever since his betrothal, and at this moment the idea of it gave him for some inexplicable reason a curious satisfaction' (148). This 'curious satisfaction' is elaborated upon when, after their marriage, Porius and Morfydd copulate by the 'Home Rock', on which they had played as children. Powys tells us that 'their shared playmate memories ... just as if it had been incest between brother and sister ... took much of the sweet strangeness of love away' (753). However, he adds, this very familiarity gives them the 'great advantage possessed by the incestuous rulers of Egypt, namely the fact that having been familiar from childhood with each other's personalities they were able to plunge into the perilous salt sea of love without being distracted by anything strange in each other's character beyond the eternal strangeness of male to female and female to male' (754). In the case of Porius and Morfydd, then, incest is not merely condoned, but is envisaged as a positive good.

By the end of the novel, Morfydd and Porius are not only married but are deeply committed to one another. However, at the time of her wedding Morfydd is in love not with Porius but with her (and his) other first cousin, Rhun. Even after consummating her marriage with Porius, she still loves Rhun, wishes to have a child by him, and barely resists an impulse to seduce him (510, 709–18, 735). Porius, half aware of all this, reflects that 'if he found that Morfydd loved old Rhun and wished to be the mother of Rhun's child rather than his ... well, he would see what he would do!' (415) Rhun, too, is attracted to Morfydd and at one point almost rapes her (469–70). Since many societies proscribe intercourse with a first cousin as incestuous, it is of interest that in Powys's Edeyrnion no one – least of all any of these three cousins – even considers the possibility that it might be problematic.

Another striking incestuous relationship in Porius is that between Porius's uncle Brochvael and Brochvael's maternal aunt Erddud. Erddud has for many years been 'obsessed' by an 'incestuous passion' for Brochvael, and on Porius's and Morfydd's wedding day, as the sounds of the orgiastic ritual of the Fisher King fill the air, she at last succeeds in seducing him. Although the ecstasy of the long deferred union proves too much for the aged Erddud to bear, and she dies in the throes of orgasm (486–9), nothing in the text suggests that her death should be viewed as retribution or that her passion should be regarded as sinful.

Mention has already been made of Arthur's sinister nephew Medrawd. In the medieval French prose romance *Mort Artu* and in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* Medrawd (Modred or Mordred) is depicted as Arthur's illegitimate son by his

half-sister Morgause. In *Porius* Medrawd is apparently the son of Arthur's sister Anna and Llew ap Cynvarch. However, the anonymous young priest who plays a prominent role in the later chapters of the novel derogatorily refers to Medrawd as 'that incestuous son ... so they say ... of the emperor's sister ...' (737), without specifying which sister he had in mind. (Since the priest is a menacing and repugnant character, his reprobation of incest is clearly not meant to be taken as Powys's own.) Some time later we are also told that 'Afangddu obscurely imagined the emperor [Arthur] ... as having, like other demigods, a succubus for his sister-spouse' (846-7). Again, which sister is not specified, but in any case it is apparent that the emperor of all Britain is popularly believed to have committed incest – albeit 'like other demigods', of whom such things are only to be expected.

One of the many foibles of the novel's hero, Porius, is that he is intensely attracted to his deceased great grandmother, the giantess Creiddylad, whom he has never seen. This 'obsession' (400) is 'one of the dominant emotions of his life' (536-7). It causes him to think that his 'real secret life has been more like what Iddawc's mother, the giantess [i.e. Creiddylad] would understand' (409). He craves 'in the very pit of his stomach' to have actually seen Creiddylad 'in the flesh' (150), and in contemplating a bifurcated alder stump reflects that 'there had been moments when he had wondered if Iddawc's mother, the giantess, had thighs like this' (43). His fixation on his great-grandmother also causes him to feel 'a longing for some vague feminine creature inhabiting the mountains whom he could associate with his ancestress ...' (397) and to experience 'secret desires' that are 'in some strange way connected with Cader Idris and with Creiddylad's gigantic race' (420). Finally, of course, he tracks down an actual giantess, the last survivor of her race, 'whose name he felt surer with every step he took was and must be Creiddylad' (544). The two experience an instantaneous, overpowering mutual attraction, and with virtually no preliminaries mate on the ground (540-49). While it may be that no lawgiver has yet deemed it necessary to proscribe intercourse with one's great-grandmother as incest, it seems reasonable to call Porius's obsession incestuous, so that his mating with the younger Creiddylad would be, so to speak, incest by proxy.

Other, vaguer hints at incest inhere in the name of Lot-El-Azziz and the sobriquet of his wife Zora, 'the Moabitess', since in the Bible the Moabites are the eponymous tribe of Moab, an incestuous son of Lot by one of his daughters.

But the most striking incestuous relationship in *Porius* may be between Gogfran Derwydd and his brother Llew. Llew, whose name recalls that of the incestuous son of Gwydion and Arionrod, is portrayed as androgynous and seemingly pregnant: ... Llew's helplessness resembled that of a woman with child (528). ... this loose-limbed man, who, though he had testicles, resembled a pregnant female (559). This is a hint² that Llew is the father of the mysterious red-headed child, possibly a reincarnation of the long-dead outlaw y Bychan, who appears in the Derwydd's underground quarters in the Mound of y Bychan after

the Derwydd's death. The hint is fortified by the name of the child's terra-cotta wolf cub, 'Bleiddyn' (777-8), which is also the name of a cub incestuously engendered by Gwydion ap Don upon his younger brother Gilfaethwy when the pair have been metamorphosed into wolves by their magician-uncle, Math, in the *Mabinogion*. This also suggests that the father of the child was Llew's brother, the deceased Derwydd. Porius's dreamy speculation that the child was 'created by the Derwydd out of sea-weed and fungus and white bog-moss (779) is plainly no more than a botanical red herring.

Instances of incest occur elsewhere in John Cowper Powys's fiction, but nowhere so saliently or often as in *Porius*. I had hoped to explain them all in terms of some unifying symbolic theme: to show, for example, that in *Porius* incest represents the quest of the soul to fuse its own inner male and female aspects. However, the various instances of incest that I have mentioned seem too disparate to be amenable to a single, over-arching explanation. Surely, for example, the evolving love of Morfydd and Porius (one of the novel's triumphs) is not to be equated with Gwydion's relationships with Arianrod or Gilfaethwy. It may be more profitable to ask what view of incest would be taken in the future 'Golden Age of Happiness' plotted by Myrddin Wyllt to begin 'perhaps ten thousand years from now' (285-7). In that age, I think Powys's own antinomian, Pelagian, and rather nebulous moral vision would prevail. Then humans would be free from 'bloody tyrants and false prophets and dying priests' (313), and we would see 'The ending forever of the Love-sense and Loss-sense, the beginning forever of the Peace paradisiac' proclaimed in the novel by Taliessin (428). While this age is only vaguely adumbrated in *Porius*, I think we may safely take it that in it there would no longer be any taboo against incest.

Robert Kunkel

NOTES

¹ Chapter and page citations are to the Colgate University Press edition of *Porius* (1994).

² In comments posthumously published in *The Powys Newsletter* iv (Colgate University Press 1974-5), Powys rather coyly stated that it was 'conceivable' that the mysterious child of Chapter 31 may have been 'taken, dare we hint from the inert over-sexed body of Llew where it may have been "inseminated" by Gogfran Derwyd himself.' I am grateful to Robin Wood for calling Powys's comments on *Porius* to my attention.

In a 1950 letter to his sister Katie, JCP wrote that he had once thought his ideal future would be to be a famous actor 'living with Nelly [their sister Eleanor, who died in April 1893 when she was 13 and he 20] and always acting with Nelly for she and I were alike exactly in our mental life, our aesthetic or artistic life, our emotional life, our imaginative life, and our erotic life.' (Belinda Humfrey ed., *Essays on John Cowper Powys* (1972), 105). Although almost certainly not meant to suggest actual incest, this reminiscence shows that more than half a century before writing of the love of Porius and Morfydd JCP had toyed with the notion that a brother and sister might make a uniquely compatible couple.

Members' News and Notes

Oliver Deverell Holt 1909–1997 Artist, naturalist, pupil and life-long friend of Littleton Powys died peacefully on 5 December. A Service of Thanksgiving for his life, attended by hundreds of his friends and admirers, was held in Sherborne Abbey on 15 January. There is a reference to the young Oliver in *The Joy Of It* (p.189).

Publisher Jonathan Wood offers, *Beaker, A Narrative Poem*, by Annabel Thomas, about the life and after-life of a Bronze Age Princess revealed by a burial urn. In his foreword Jonathan Wood writes: 'This new narrative poem sequence, *Beaker*, transports us with a gentle but well wrought intoxication into the world of the memory and the past, where the psychometric power of unearthed objects conveys unearthed experience, made as real for the reader as for the character that discovers them in the poem ...' Tastefully illustrated by Althea D. Wood and finely produced in a limited edition of 125 copies, A5 format, cream card wraps, 20 pages, *Beaker* is available now: Signed edition £6 / unsigned £4, from Jonathan Wood, BM Spellbound, London WC1N 3XX.

Charles Lock writes: Recently published : *Poems by Iris Murdoch*, edited by Yozo Muroya and Paul Hullah (University Education Press, Okayama, Japan, 1997). In a most interesting introduction we learn that Iris Murdoch prefers to read the classics, but enjoys 'a limited selection of modern fiction (such as A. S. Byatt, Kazuo Ishiguro, Milan Kundera, Kingsley Amis and Andrew N. Wilson). Her favourite writer is John Cowper Powys (1872–1963) and she names his *Wolf Solent* (1929), *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932) and *Weymouth Sands* (1934) as her favourite works.' (pp. 19–20) In Iris Murdoch's latest novel *Jackson's Dilemma* (1995), one of the characters is almost parodically Powysian (driving aside):

On the next day he [Edward] drove down to Dorchester ... He ate now, ravenously, bread and butter, eggs ... (Penguin ed., 1996, 97)

Edward is recreating an earlier journey that he had made with his younger brother to Weymouth and the Chesil Beach:

Random nights spent at various small villages carried them to Bath, where they stayed two nights, then on to spiritual and exciting Glastonbury then another spiritual and exciting night at Dorchester, where they bought a book by John Cowper Powys, and lingered at Maiden Castle ... (Penguin, 99)

Llewelyn Powys wrote in his essay *A Montacute Field* of his fondness for 'a certain historical field situated beyond Batemore ... The name of the large romantic field is Witcombe ...' Several years ago there was an attempt (thwarted by the planners) to turn the valley into a golf course. It was subsequently bought by the local Council in partnership with English Nature. Although there has always

been public access, it has been strictly via a well-defined footpath. Now, thanks to an E. C. grant, the whole valley has been opened up for recreational use; all the intersecting wire fences have gone and walkers may wander where they please in a landscape restored to what it was at the turn of the century. For Powysian visitors to Montacute it is a must. Leave the village by Townsend, the lane to Witcombe faces you at the top of Hollow Lane, about half a mile distant.

Many readers will have read the reviews of Herbert Williams's *John Cowper Powys* which appeared in the *The Spectator* and *Sunday Telegraph*. Herbert tells me that the book had a good launch at Ottakar's Bookshop in Aberystwyth in the Autumn, and everyone was astonished when a relation of JCP unexpectedly turned up. She was Isobel Powys who is a student at Aberystwyth, great-granddaughter of TFP, and a great-great-niece of JCP.

Susan Rands has sent me a page from *Western Morning News* which proclaims in letters about one and a half inches high – **75-mile stretch of 'Jurassic Park' shore could become as famous as Grand Canyon West gold coast is world class**. An article explains that UNESCO plans to promote the 75 miles of coast between Exmouth and Old Harry Rocks as a World Heritage Site. According to the report the region would 'benefit' from an enormous influx of foreign visitors. Susan calls this a 'dastardly plan' – as if oil exploration isn't enough to contend with!

Joan Stevens, Rosslyn House, High Street, Yoxford, Suffolk, IP17 3EP (Tel. 01728 668368) has issued a catalogue of books by John Cowper Powys in which 181 items are listed for sale.

Christopher White, 448 Upper Richmond Road, Richmond, TW10 5DY (Tel. 0181 968 4387) has issued a catalogue containing 152 titles by and about the Powyses and their circle.

Anne Powys, granddaughter of Will Powys, and co-author Rudolf Schulz are to publish: *Pinguone, Kenya, Succulents and their Environment*, chapter five of which apparently deals with family history.

Details from: Schulz Publishing, PO Box 40, Teesdale, Victoria, VIC3328, Australia, or via the internet: www.tarrex.com.au/kenyabook.

Michael Scaife d'Ingerthorpe tells me that he recently visited Blaenau and found Waterloo much as he remembered it in 1990, except that the plaque has added to it the words 'I love Carrie'. He says that this graffiti is not too noticeable from a distance, having been scratched into the surface of the slate. (The Committee is dealing with the matter.)

'Found Poems' in the work of John Cowper Powys

In her review of *John Cowper Powys* by Herbert Williams (*Newsletter* 32) Patricia Dawson commented, 'Powys's poetic talent went into the writing of his novels'. It was therefore a surprise to her when she received from Colin Blundell found poems extracted, not from the novels of JCP, but from a philosophical work. Ed.

Found Poem

John Cowper Powys: *The Art of Happiness* pp 57/58

life is lived
in a mental world –
we may present the appearance
of forked radishes
or of sausages tied at the neck and waist
or of scarecrows on perambulatory sticks
or of fancy dolls
or of phantom masks of tragedy
but from the round knobs on top of us
there look forth upon the world
those terrible holes into eternity
and what you see there is the world of mind
a world full of pits
that go down into hell
and of corridors leading to paradise

The text from which this is taken reads as follows (John Lane The Bodley Head, 1935):

What is not sufficiently realised is that the whole drama of life goes on in individual minds, and is independent of outward actions and outward events. Our life is lived in a mental world whereof the material background is for ever changing according to the mood of the individual mind.

And this does not only apply to imaginative or intellectual people. It applies to everyone! We may present the appearance of "forked radishes," or of sausages tied at the neck and waist, or of scare-crows on perambulating sticks, or of fancy dolls, or of phantom-masks of tragedy. From the round knobs on the top of us there look forth upon the world those terrible holes into eternity that we call human eyes and what you see at the bottom of these holes is the world of the mind, a world of pits that go down into hell and of corridors leading to paradise.

Printed below is the final stanza of a longer poem, also from *The Art of Happiness* and to be found in the text on p. 156.

in-spite-of
a spiritual battle-cry
rising up from your solitary navel:
you utter it as if
you were the ideal stoic philosopher
who can abide *imparvidus*
while the whole *terrarum* crashes
about him – the in-spite-of act
asks nothing desires nothing hopes nothing
it just asserts your own solitary will-power
bent on resistance and resolved to be cheerful

Colin Blundell is a poet, composer and publisher who lives in Lincolnshire. He delights in discovering 'found poems' amid the prose of writers he admires and is always keen to acknowledge whence they came. He hopes that his 'found poems' may stimulate interest in their out-of-print authors, among whom John Cowper Powys is a particular favourite.

The Society's Publications

As usual, a volume of *The Powys Journal* is well in hand, and will certainly be ready by the time of the Conference in August; handing it out is one of the regular rituals to which everyone looks forward. Our Editor, John Williams, has once more gathered a splendid collection of articles for Volume VIII, which are now being processed on the Macintosh computer, and proofs will soon be sent out, texts corrected, pictures inserted, and then the printing will be done.

At last, at last, *The Dorset Year: The Diary of John Cowper Powys from June 1934 to June 1935* will be with the printer when you read this, and copies will be sent out around the end of April to everyone who has ordered one; these will need about a hundred and fifty parcels, and then there are copyright copies to go, review copies, complimentary copies: plenty of hard work!

There will also be ample copies for stock and for sale. The price including postage is £29: see the inside back cover of the *Newsletter*. If you haven't ordered one, now is the time to repair the omission.

The private life of John Cowper Powys

First printed in *The Guardian* 21 July 1961,
reprinted with permission

The literary market now shows a slight upturn in the stock of John Cowper Powys (pronounced 'Cooper Poois'), but the man himself is far from such worldly considerations. Even at the peak of his powers, he seemed more other worldly: a poet, novelist and essayist – one of the old 'men of letters' – steeped in fantasy rather than realism.

At 88 he has withdrawn from this world as far as a little stone house in Blaenau Ffestiniog and the route to it over the hills might run out of his books. Dark deserts sweep away from the bumpy country road, and not even a telegraph pole connects the moon-struck landscape with the twentieth century. The link is John Cowper Powys himself: a man bridging not only the timelessness of this Welsh corner but the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; one of the last links with a world as dead as Shaw and Yeats and Henry Irving, three of the recurring names in the Powys mythology.

The names that bob up most often are the legion of brothers and sisters – who with him, seemed to range over the arts of the Western world as if they were pathfinders for their fellow Englishmen. 'Gertrude was the genius of the family,' John Cowper Powys says now and shows off some of her paintings as if to prove it, but then he has been accused by more than one critic of having a spirit of humility verging on the pathological. In his invitation to visit him, he ended 'Yours sincerely – if I have any sincerity in me,' which was certainly in keeping with that most self-searching of autobiographies he wrote nearly thirty years ago.

I had said I wanted only to ask him about his work, I wouldn't trouble him about his private life – this was in case he was leery of journalists – but he thought this ridiculous. You couldn't divorce a writer from his private life – least of all from his childhood. And time and again, he went back to his childhood in Shirley, Derbyshire, where his father was the vicar. He must be one of the few writers not only to confess to having had a happy childhood but to revel in it now he looks back at it over eighty years.

He once called himself the Loch Ness Monster 'in person'. When he lectured in the United States, children used to yell after him 'Shakespeare!' a tribute to his lean figure, hypnotising face and histrionic mane. Now, in old age he looks like a cross between Pasternak and Henry Irving. The high cheek bones that retain his good looks and the humorous, yet mystical glint in his eyes are the Pasternak part of him; Irving, an early hero, is reflected in the way he uses his voice and in his sweeping gestures that cleave past and present together.

Talking about influences, he named the two 'Alice' books read as a boy and went on to give several lusty renderings of 'Twas brillig ... 'How wonderful it was

to invent words! Was it even better to invent people? 'Perhaps so,' he said, but 'Alice' words like 'wabe' were the things which held him that day. Was James Joyce (whose *Finnegan's Wake* was in his bookcase) a word-maker in the same class? Seizing on the name James, he spun a story about how William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* had made him miss giving a lecture at Princeton. The book had gripped him so much that he had gone past his station on a train. He had lectured in all the American states except two and he could no longer remember which two they were.

He had been so thunderstruck by Henry Irving that in lecturing he had tried to imitate him and many an American audience had come reeling out after experiencing a performance. The mention of Henry Irving led him to another 'famous Irish writer' who, on hearing that Irving was feeling on top of the world, had cried "I'll take him down!" Was it Bernard Shaw? "That's right! – Shaw." Then there was that Irish poet who had warned him, "Never sacrifice your imagination to your character." Was that Yeats? "That's right – W. B. Yeats." Yeats had meant of course, you should never hesitate to add lies to a truthful story to make it a better one. That is, as a writer. It might be different as a man. But then he had already stressed that writer and man couldn't be divorced. A tour of his pictures took him back to his family – the wonderfully happy marriage of his parents. It had been complementary – his father had been simple and direct and his mother had been subtle and brilliant, and they had shared exactly the same sense of humour. His father used to take him walks and tell him stories. The hero was Giant Grumble, the heroine Fairy Sprightly and the villain The Professor. "Since then I have always been meeting professors and I had to try to stop thinking of them as wicked characters." As if to prove they weren't really, he started to enthuse about Dr. Enid Starkie who had helped him in preparing for his book on Rabelais. "This little girl – Enid Starkie – helped me very much. She's what they call a don at Oxford." Only a patriarchal figure could get away with calling the dominant Dr. Starkie a "little girl."

He talked about his son who had been converted to Catholicism and then had converted his mother. Both of them were now in the Catholic cemetery at Bath. Spotting a picture of the present Pope on his bookcase, he quickly pointed out that he had it there because the Pope was from Venice – and he liked all Venetians. His Aunt Dora – 'She was Dora the ugly but I loved her anyway' – had first taken him to Venice and he enthused for several minutes on the theme that it was the city that everybody should see before he died.

This mention of religions led him to stress that he had not changed at all in his own beliefs. Employing an Irving expression and gesture, he boomed: 'I still hate God. I can't accept Hell as a good invention, of sending people to the fires down there and look for some good in the Devil.'

He was in fact at 88, almost the same as he had always been. In a present day city, in an England poorer in originals, he would seem like an unexploded bomb

ready to go off at any moment among the organisation men. And, like most writers he seems the sum of his books rather than being truly represented by any one of them. If you take even one of his more typical novels, like *A Glastonbury Romance*, a majestic imaginative passage can suddenly slump into too flighty fantasy; but in the sum of his work the Powys character stands out. His work is really a reflection, a continuing autobiography, a heroic 'tale' (a favourite word). He rarely writes about the real world, but when he does he is not only strict in his frankness – he does a Freudian job on himself in the *Autobiography* – but piercing about society with no holds barred.

The following passage from his autobiography, for example, says a good deal about the US, particularly in the light of Ernest Hemmingway's death: 'I began to realise what extraordinary originality, what *mad* originality, American men and women who *are* original at all, must possess, to deal with the tidal-wave of catastrophically normal humanity. Could it be, I asked myself as I surveyed the summer-lads in their trim bathing suits, that it was about these super-normal pillars of society that Walt Whitman wrote his lovely and passionate Calamus poems? It seemed unbelievable, but it only made me the more convinced that to be a genius in America is twice as difficult as elsewhere; and that when you are a genius, like Whitman, or Melville, or Masters, or Dreiser, or Vachel Lindsey, or Isadora Duncan, or Edna Millay, you've got to develop a sort of protective chain armour or you'll soon be driven to suicide ...'

That was the America of the Lost Generation: now, if he could leave his Welsh refuge, don his own 'protective chain armour', and take a look at the post-war world, he might find the 'super-normal pillars of society' here as well as in America, in his beloved Venice, in Russia, everywhere, in fact outside the Powys private world. There, the genius in the super pillar of society sends back 'the tidal-wave of catastrophically normal humanity' 'with an ease Canute would have envied. In this, as in the serenity of his childhood, John Cowper Powys is easily spotted as one of the last of the pre-World War writers: a writer of the romantic age that believed in heroes.

W. W. Weatherby