THE EMERGENCE OF THE GEORGIAN SCHOOL OF POETRY IN ENGLAND

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ABSTRACT

The article introduces a group of mainly young English poets who rescued English poetry from its decline at the end of the Victorian period and imparted a new sound and music to it in the first few decades of the 20th century. During the period of publication [1911-1922] of the literary journal called Georgian Poetry, which was edited by Edward Marsh, their contributions appeared with regularity in its pages. In consequence, the journal became a popular and financial success, and its influence as a literary milestone over the years has not disappeared. The best known names among the Georgian poets are Hilaire Belloc, Edmund Blunden, Rupert Brooke, W.H. Davies, Ralph Hodgson, James Elroy Flecker, Walter de la Mare, Harold Monro, Sir J.C. Squire, and Edward Thomas.

Key Words: Early 20th Century English Poetry, Georgian Poets, Post-Victorian Literary Movements, Edward Marsh, Harold Monro.

With the death of Queen Victoria in 1901 the momentous Victorian Age came to an end. In the area of literature, a sense of exhaustion was apparent. A feeling of listlessness, of decline, was all-pervasive. As Legouis and Cazamian write, 'The first years of the twentieth century seemed to show a decline in the vitality of English poetry.'[1] This feeling is brought out even more strongly by A.C. Ward thus: 'When the twentieth century opened, Tennyson had been dead nine years, and there was a widespread impression that English poetry had died with him.'[2] The older poets such as Hardy [d. 1926] and Kipling [d. 1936] continued to produce verse but of an attenuated quality after the initial fires of their creativity had simmered down. The decline of high quality poetry in English was perceived as a 'crisis'. As Vivian de Sola Pinto writes: 'The crisis in English poetry which

1 E.Legouis & L. Cazamian, *History of English Literature* (London: MacMillan, 1964), 1388.

2 A.C. Ward, *Twentieth Century English Literature* (London: Methuen & Co, 1965), 143.

began some thirty years before the outbreak of World War One is a part of the moral, intellectual, social and economic crisis of England and Western Europe.'[3]

Clearly, literature, to a considerable extent, is a product of the society which it mirrors. The depressive feeling that hung like a pall over the universe of poetry and literature was a hangover from the 'death' of the Victorian Age after 'the high noon of empire' sank rapidly into the gloom of an infernal darkness.

A new kind of poetry was needed, and this could best be produced by a new generation of poets with fresh and vigorous feelings untainted by the long and dark shadows of the Victorian Age. The Edwardian Age – eponymous with King Edward VII [r. 1901-1910] –was an age of transition. As such, it was not productive of any poetic innovation or the arrival of a new poetic voice. With the death of Swinburne [d. 1909] and Meredith [d. 1909], the time had come to bury the dead. The generation of poets who had been born in the last few decades of the nineteenth century had yet to display their potential. The writers of the Edwardian age have been called 'survivors and precursors' by A.C. Ward.[4] This is because they were the survivors from the wreckage of the fag-end of the Victorian Age as well as the precursors of a new age – the Georgian age – that was to see the flowering of a -fresh burst of poetic genius.

It is necessary at the outset to clear up a possible source of confusion. The appellation of Georgian poets is not applied to all the poets writing in the reign of King George V [r. 1910-1935] but only to those forty poets whose contributions appeared in the journal ***Georgian Poetry*** edited by Edward Marsh between 1911-22. Thus it would not include poets writing before, during or after this eleven-year period, such as Hardy and Kipling or Yeats and T.S. Eliot. In view of the utter paucity of poetry writing and of poets of acknowledged stature in 1910 (following the death of Edward VII), T.S. Eliot made the apt observation regarding the 'crisis' outlined above in the area of English poetry in these words:

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[3] Vivian de Sola Pinto, *Crisis in English Poetry1880-1940* (London: Arrow Books; Gray Arrow edition, 1963), 9.

[4] A.C. Ward, op. cit., p. 145.

> 'The situation in poetry in 1909 or 1910 was stagnant to a degree difficult for any person of today to conceive'.[5]

As John Press puts it accurately: 'At the turn of the century, the upper-middle-class culture of Victorian England was moribund, and the poetry nurtured by this culture dwindled into feebleness.'[6] And as Charles Kingham puts it, 'For too long poets and playwrights had…been cut off from the mass of the English people, from their ideas, manners, speech, amusements, aspirations'.[7] In spite of all these negative manifestations, in the words of Maurya Zaturenska, 'a note of prophecy was in the air.'[8]

This prophecy was fulfilled by the appearance of the journal *Georgian Poetry* in 1911. In the very first issue, it made the sonorous proclamation of a new poetic dawn to an expectant age: 'This volume is being issued in the belief that English poetry is now once again putting on a new strength and beauty….This collection … may if it is fortunate help the lovers of poetry that we are at the beginning of another "Georgian period" which may take rank in due time with the several great ages of the past.

Later, after its spectacular success, it was seen to be 'the dawn of a golden age' in the words of its editor, Edward Marsh.[9]

The young, vibrant, emotional and daring Georgian poets had that sureness and talent which reveal fertile temperaments that capture the attention of the public. As Herbert Palmer states, 'The Georgians aimed at perfection, at pure poetry…they were occasionally remarkably good…they seemed to establish a new dimension in verse.'[10] The volumes were a tremendous commercial and literary success. They brought the poets who contributed to the five volumes financial profits unimagined by any of them. It is certainly a remarkable phenomenon that the journal appeared at a fortuitous time and had a large circulation. It immediately filled the poetic void that had hung over British literary life. In all, a total of 77,000 copies

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5 Timothy Rogers, ed., *Georgian Poetry 1911-1922: Critical Heritage Series* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 3.

6 John Press, *A Map of English Poetry* (London: , 1971), 2.

7 Charles Kingham, *James Elroy Flecker: a critical study* (Leeds: , 1952), 1-2.

8 Maurya Zaturenska, *Love's Cross-currents* (New York: , 1964), 145.

9 Edward Marsh, ed., *Georgian Poetry 1911-1912* (London: The Poetry Bookshop, 1918).

10 Herbert Palmer, *Post-Victorian Poetry* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1938), 78.

were sold. Walter de la Mare, one of the poets included, sent a grateful poetic note to Edward Marsh:

> Alas, those millstones round my neck
> Another cheque, another cheque![11]

One of the early contributors, W.H. Davies, wrote to Marsh thus: ' You have performed a wonder, made poetry pay.'[12] The volumes also excited critical notice. Among the early reviewers there are the important names of Edmund Gosse, J.C. Squire and T.S. Eliot. The efforts of Edward Marsh in the launching of his new journal and his making it a voice for the younger generation of poets are pivotal in the subsequent successful history of Georgian poetry. It was Marsh who chose the title for the journal and according to James Reeves, ' Before the end of 1912 Marsh had gained the active cooperation of some of the younger poets and the indulgent support of those whose reputations were established'.[13]

The First World War slowed down but did not dampen the enthusiasm of either the contributors or the editors. ***Georgian Poetry*** survived the War in good shape in spite of a new school of 'War Poets' emerging out of the fires of World War One. The Georgian Poets did not exhibit less loyalty to their motherland than did their other contemporaries. In fact, the two most famous war poems were those written by Georgians viz., *The Soldier* by Rupert Brooke and *The Burial in England* by Flecker. These poets followed a natural bent in the composition of their poetry. Although the last issue of the journal ***Georgian Poetry*** appeared in 1922, the hold of the poets on the memory of the poetry-reading public continued for decades afterwards. Marsh, in his ardent advocacy of young poets and the criteria he had set for them, was firm. He correctly felt that there was an audience and a readership that desired novelty and variety in poetry. He insisted that his critical criteria should be manifested in the contributions of the young poets. His strictness in this regard earned him this remark from D.H. Lawrence who called him 'a bit of a policeman in poetry.'[14] Marsh excluded Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot from inclusion in his journal and hence earned

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[11] Marsh, op. cit., p. 327.

[12] Marsh, ibid., p. 129.

[13] James Reeves , *Georgian Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1968), xii.

[14] D.H. Lawrence , *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 404.

their critical onslaught. Much later, in an essay titled The Good-natured man, Raymond Mortimer paid his tribute to Edward Marsh in the thus: ' His services to the Arts, literature as well as painting and sculpture, have been prodigious, improbable, fabulous. He has offered incessant and practical sacrifice to the Muses; poets, and painters, and all of us who love the Arts, are immeasurably in his debt.'[15]

The arrival of the new poetic age was not a process of smooth transition, despite the hopeful heralding of it by Marsh and Munro. In spite of initial resistance by conservative elements, all such opposition was swept away by the flood of popular response. The very boldness and bravado of the poets compelled admiration. This was acknowledged by the conservative ***Times Literary Supplement*** after its initial unfavourable reaction.[16] Herbert Palmer writing in 1938 with the benefit of hindsight argued that the first Georgian anthology was probably next to Palgrave's the most important and influential anthology ever published.[17] The Georgian poet , Lascelles Abercrombie, brought out the prevalent 'spirit of the age' thus: 'What with modern science , modern philosophy, modern religion, modern politics, and modern business, the present is a time fermenting with tremendous change: the most tremendous of all changes, a change in the idealistic interpretation of the universe.'[18] Edmund Gosse called the Victorians 'sculptors' and the Georgians 'jewellers'.[19] The critic Alan Price-Jones

[15] Quoted in Christopher Hassall , *Edward Marsh: a Biography* (London: Longmans, 1959), 13-14.

[16] Edward Marsh [1872-1953] was the great patron of literature in his time and the editor of *Georgian Poetry*. The standard biography is *Edward Marsh: patron of the arts* by Christopher Hassall [1959]. Harold Monro [1879-1932] was a contributor to, and publisher of *Georgian Poetry*. He was also owner of The Poetry Bookshop – where young poets gathered and where the idea of issuing a journal was first mooted. He had been the editor of a little-known journal titled *Poetry Review* and his editorial experience facilitated the hassle-free production of the proposed new journal *Georgian Poetry.* His Poetry Bookshop provided the venue for the new journal and hence it was called the 'brainchild' of Monro by Joy Grant in her study *Harold Munro and the Poetry Bookshop* [Berkeley, 1967, p. 163]. In a telling introduction to his own poetical involvement, Monro writes thus: ' I think I know only one thing about myself for quite certain, which amounts to this: that if anyone can imagine an earth without poetry he need not imagine me as one of its inhabitants.' [Quoted in *Georgian Poetry 1911-1922*: *the critical heritage*, Ed. Timothy Rogers, London, 1977, pp. 407-408]

[17] Palmer, op. cit., p. 94.

[18] Robert H. Ross , *The Georgian Revolt : Rise and Fall of a Poetic Ideal, 1910-1922* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 39.

[19] *ibid* . , p 259

looking back at the achievement of the Georgians in 1948 wrote: 'The Georgians represent the last solid body of English poetry written for pleasure and without didactic purpose, they tried to offer not greatness but delight…'.[20]

The impact of the Georgians on the literary consciousness of Britain was positive and, as such, transcended limitations of chronology. The poets, who contributed to the journal ***Georgian Poetry*** are not narrowly associated with that limited circle alone. They have broken out of the confines of that restrictive nomenclature and today enjoy a reputation independent of their youthful contributions to the once-popular journal. Among them are Rupert Brooke, Walter de la Mare, John Drinkwater, James Elroy Flecker, John Masefield and D.H. Lawrence. As Robert H. Ross writes, ' The hallmark of the Georgian poet was his vitality, the sense of buoyancy and optimism which he carried over to his poetry. With the Georgians, English poetry regained for a few years the joy of living.'[21] The Georgians and their poetry represented a state of mind that impacted positively on the collective literary consciousness of Britain.

[20] Alan Price-Jones, John Lehman, ed., *The Penguin New Writing* [No.351] (London: Penguin Books, 1948), 100.

[21] Robert H. Ross*, The Georgian Revolt: rise and fall of a poetic ideal 1910-1922* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 258.