A. E. HOUSMAN
A REASSESSMENT

Also by Alan W. Holden

MOLLY HOLDEN

Selected Poems (*with a Memoir of Molly Holden*)

Also by J. Roy Birch

UNKIND TO UNICORNS

Selected Comic Verse of A. E. Housman

A. E. Housman

A Reassessment

Edited by

Alan W. Holden

and

J. Roy Birch

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Introduction

That the body of work which constitutes A. E. Housman's poetic output is small has often been remarked on. The two books of verse published in his lifetime, *A Shropshire Lad* and *Last Poems*, contain 105 poems. Laurence Housman printed 72 after his brother's death in *More Poems* and *Additional Poems*. There are also a few translations and the light verse. Moreover, these poems are nearly all short or very short. The longest, 'Hell Gate' (*LP* XXXI), is 104 lines, and the two longest other poems are 'Terence, this is stupid stuff' (*ASL* LXII) at 76 lines and 'The Merry Guide' (*ASL* XLII) at 60 lines. In the work published in Housman's lifetime, about five-eighths of the poems are 20 lines or fewer in length. And yet this small body of work has aroused intense interest from 1896 to the present day.

The volume edited by Philip Gardner (*A. E. Housman: the Critical Heritage*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992) is of great value in showing that there was lively and widespread critical attention paid to *ASL* from the beginning, in both the UK and the USA. The American reviewers were rather more grudging in their response, but, as P. G. Naiditch pointed out in a review of Gardner's book,¹ there were numerous reviews not reproduced by Gardner, a caveat underlined in some measure by Ben Fisher in the article reproduced in this volume (Chapter 2). Critical interest seems to have outrun general appreciation; it is well known that the first edition (of 500 copies) took about two years to sell out. Grant Richards, who had been much impressed by the book on its appearance and had written a review for the *Review of Reviews*, became a publisher shortly after, and took over the publication of *ASL* for its second and subsequent editions, as well as publishing *LP* and some of Housman's classical work. The 1898 *ASL* was also extensively noticed in the press; some of these articles were long and detailed, and, again, were mostly favourable. But even though Richards was an enthusiastic promoter of *ASL*, this second edition (also of 500 copies) sold slowly, so that, by the end of 1902, after two further editions, under 1500 copies had been sold in the UK. From then on, however, the story is of steady

growth in public appreciation, aided by numerous cheap editions (partly made possible by Housman's refusal, for many years, to take any royalties) and song-settings by many English composers. The 1914–18 war undoubtedly had the effect of increasing the popularity of the poems. It followed naturally that *Last Poems* would sell in large numbers from the day of publication in 1922. Richards was very cautious in printing only 4000 copies (against Housman's suggestion of 10 000). By the end of the year (the book was published in October), a further 17 000 had been printed.

Again, most reviewers of *LP*, in both the UK and the USA, were high in its praise. Some used the occasion for an extended consideration of Housman's poetry; these writers included J. B. Priestley, H. W. Garrod and J. F. M. MacDonald. Reviews of the posthumous work and the *Collected Poems* of 1939, as well as of the lecture *The Name and Nature of Poetry* (1933), were also generally favourable.

It is worth noticing the main thrusts of these commentaries from 1896 on. Many writers believed that the poet was a new voice in the world of the 1890s (one remembers A. E. H.'s protests, when, in later years, an editor wished to include some of the poems from *ASL* in an anthology of 1890s poetry – on which see Ben Fisher's essay in Chapter 2). A number drew attention to the narrow limits of the poetry, in both style and content, but stressed the consummate skill within these limits. There was considerable reference to the artlessness of the verse (the 'perfect simplicity' of Hubert Bland, the 'sancta simplicitas' of Louise Guiney); but as many critics wrote of the art which conceals art and of a hard-earned surface simplicity (and indeed, this balance between the simple-seeming surface and the linguistic and metric artifice is a feature which may exercise critics in our own day). Local colour ('fresh country pictures', for instance) was sometimes remarked on, or on occasions denied.

Influences or supposed influences upon the poetry were also noted from an early date. The work of Heine was referred to more than once, as were Burns, Robert Louis Stevenson, the ballads, Blake and others, though some reviewers thought the poet in no one else's debt. Rather curiously, for an age much more familiar than our own with the Bible, Housman's biblical allusions do not seem to have aroused much comment from early commentators.

Gardner, in his long and useful introduction to his *Critical Heritage* volume, notes that it was not until after Housman's death that 'a significant number of critics began to express dissatisfaction with his work', and P. G. Naiditch, in the article referred to above, refines this, making the point that it was the later critics, such as Raymond Mortimer, Orwell and Lawrence Leighton, who drew specific and unfavourable attention to what they took to be Housman's self-pity and the 'adolescent' qualities of the verse, terms apparently not used by the early critics at all. Cyril Connolly's piece in the *New Statesman* of May 1936, an obituary, which evoked replies from F. L. Lucas, Martin Cooper, L. P. Wilkinson and John Sparrow, spoke of triteness of technique, banality of thought and the 'metrically morbid experiments in the five-line stanza' (a puzzling phrase, then and now; Connolly was clearly not aware of the quite common use of the five-line stanza, with varying rhyme-schemes, by such Victorian poets as George Meredith, D. G. Rossetti and Arthur Symons). Connolly also loftily dismissed Housman's claim to be a classical poet – a claim, as one of the correspondents pointed out, never made by Housman himself.

Now came the time for the biographers and the writers of memoirs. One of the earliest books was the Bromsgrove Memorial Supplement, *Alfred Edward Housman: Recollections*, with contributions by, among others, Katharine Symonds, A. E. H.'s sister, Laurence Housman, R. W. Chambers, and A. S. F. Gow. Laurence Housman's *A. E. H.* (published in the USA as *My Brother, A. E. Housman*) followed in 1937. This contained a memoir, a number of letters (most of them previously unpublished), poems (the *Additional Poems*), and light verse and parodies. In quick succession followed *A Buried Life* by Percy Withers (1940) – Withers had known A. E. H. from 1917 – and, of great importance and entertainment value, Grant Richards's *Housman: 1897–1936* (1941). Richards had of course known Housman for a long time and had gradually established a friendship with him (such that they sometimes went on holiday together). His book contained numerous letters. The biographies proper began to appear after the Second World War: George L. Watson's *A. E. Housman* in 1957, and Maude M. Hawkins's *A. E. Housman: Man Behind a Mask* and Norman Marlow's *A. E. Housman: Scholar and Poet* both in 1958.

When Christopher Ricks edited the volume *A. E. Housman: a Collection of Critical Essays* in 1968, he stated in the introduction that 'the quality of Housman's poetry . . . is no longer assured of

recognition'; though even so, he acknowledged that the poems 'disrupt all the normal allegiances', since among Housman's admirers were to be counted William Empson and (represented in the volume) Cleanth Brooks, F. W. Bateson and Randall Jarrell. Hugh Kenner and F. R. Leavis were noted as adverse critics. Ricks printed poems by Auden, Pound and Kingsley Amis to underline the close attention paid to A. E. H. by modern poets.

The essays chosen by Ricks were almost exclusively reprinted from elsewhere. A number offer close readings of particular poems, Randall Jarrell's and Cleanth Brooks's contributions being the most noteworthy in this respect. Brooks, in one of his general comments, makes comparisons with the work of William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway – courage and stoic endurance are presented for our consideration and approval by all three writers. John Wain sees as a fault what the earlier reviewers of *Last Poems* saw largely as a virtue, namely that there is no development discernible between 1896 and 1922. There is some attention paid to relationships (or lack of them) between the poetry and the life, and between the scholarship and the poetry. J. P. Sullivan's essay is concerned with defining what he takes to be Housman's limitations as a model for contemporary classical scholarship, and in the only article written especially for the volume, F. W. Bateson stresses (though not in great detail) the importance of considering Housman's sexual orientation in any approach to the poetry.

The years since Ricks's volume have seen a further increase in the amount of attention paid to Housman, as man, poet and classical scholar. The Housman Society was founded in 1973 in Bromsgrove, Housman's birthplace. Its purpose is to foster interest in the Housman family, including Laurence and Clemence, brother and sister of A. E. H., both of them writers and artists, but inevitably most of the material in the *Journal* (published annually since 1974, except for a gap in 1976) is concerned with A. E. H. Several worthwhile books have been published in the critical, biographical and bibliographical fields: John Pugh's *Bromsgrove and the Housmans* (1974), Richard Perceval Graves's *A. E. Housman* (1979), Norman Page's *A. E. Housman: a Critical Biography* (1983, reprinted 1996), John Bayley's *Housman's Poems* (1992), Keith Jebb's *A. E. Housman* (1992), *A. E. Housman: a Bibliography* (John Carter and John Sparrow, revised edition by William White, 1982) and P. G. Naiditch's *Problems in the Life and Writings of A. E. Housman* (1995).

The 1996 celebrations marking the centenary of the publication of *A Shropshire Lad*, with academic lectures, poetry readings and music, in venues as varied as Ludlow, Oxford, London and Bromsgrove (the list is by no means exhaustive), were well attended and enthusiastically received; the current appeal of Housman is not simply to the scholarly.

The present volume, which was conceived as part of the centenary celebrations, shows that academic interest in A. E. H. is still strong and widespread: contributions from the UK, the USA, Israel and Japan are included. As to the variety of focus, that is clearly apparent. Here are, for instance, close readings, historical and bibliographical studies, and comparisons with other writers – indeed, with another culture. Housman is seen as poet, man, classicist, and source of inspiration for song-writers. Some might challenge Keith Jebb's assertion '[w]hat *ASL* is about . . . is not Housman's homosexuality, but the inexpressibility of homosexuality as such, of a homosexual community,' but the challenge would need to explore the linguistic parameters in the close detail evident in his essay. Perhaps a bibliographer with much time at his disposal could take up either – or both – of the challenges offered by Ben Fisher and Paul Naiditch: to present the totality of the initial responses in the press to the publication of *ASL* (as Professor Fisher remarks, there were, in 1896, 70-odd daily newspapers in London alone), and to determine exactly how many copies of *ASL* were printed, and sold, by Grant Richards.² Geoffrey Hill, one of the most highly regarded of contemporary poets, has provided us with a challenge to examine the tension in Housman's poetry between form and content and to reconsider whether the simple delight and pleasure commonly held to be derivable from the poetry is so simple. And Carol Efrati's suggestion that it is possible that Housman knew some Hebrew could surely bear some further investigation.

This introduction began with a restatement of the familiar paradox that Housman's poetry, though limited in scale and apparently in scope, has nonetheless evoked much attention since the first publication of *ASL*. John Bayley confesses that his earlier statement, that 'we always know where we are with Housman', needs considerable qualification: 'his personality is both extremely definite and remarkably evasive' – and, as he and other critics point out, the same simultaneous clarity and evasiveness present one of the most intriguing aspects of the verse, perhaps still to be completely

assessed. But, equally intriguingly, there are other areas of A. E. H.'s works which have not been fully explored. Housman always had a great interest in metrics; in *The Name and Nature of Poetry*, he tells us that he had first thought of taking the 'Artifice of Versification' as his subject for the lecture, and claims that he could have added a few useful pages to the 'few pages of Coventry Patmore and a few of Frederic Myers [which] contain all, so far as I know, or all of value, which has been written on such matters' – a coat-trailing assertion when one remembers the audience for the lecture (a footnote mentions some of the topics he might have touched on). But has there been a full treatment of Housman's practices in matters of rhythm, rhyme and verse-form? A re-examination of Housman's Notebooks, now in the Library of Congress, is part of Dr Archie Burnett's complete re-edition of the poems (see Select Bibliography), and will no doubt establish whether, as has been suggested, Tom Burns Haber's book³ has quite substantial omissions. Housman's prose has not been fully or adequately discussed, though Norman Page has some excellent paragraphs on the subject.⁴ More peripherally, perhaps, little attention has been paid to the comic verse, or to Housman's influence on other poets.

It is of course of little use to look forward even twenty or thirty years, to try to guess in what ways Housman's poetry will be read, if at all. Perhaps during the next century his wry view of pastoralism will become impossibly remote for the general reader and an exhausted, or pointless, topic for the literary critic (supposing such continue to exist). We cannot know. But then, few reviewers or readers in 1896 could have predicted that the new slim volume, of so little consequence to any publisher that the poet had to pay the costs of publication himself, would remain constantly in print for the next one hundred years.

Notes

1. *Housman Society Journal*, vol. 20 (1994) 79–103.
2. As Naiditch writes: '[D]espite sixty years of bibliographical investigation, no one at present knows how many editions and reprints of *ASL* have appeared; none, how many copies of all these printings were issued. Of copies printed and bound, none can say how many were sold.'

3. *The Manuscript Poems of A. E. Housman* (London: OUP, 1955).
4. *A. E. Housman: A Critical Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1983, repr. 1996) pp. 139–47.

Throughout this volume, the accepted convention for referring to Housman's poems has been generally followed: *ASL* (for *A Shropshire Lad*); *LP* (for *Last Poems*); *MP* (for *More Poems*); *AP* (for *Additional Poems*); *CP* (*Collected Poems*).