Hang Your Halo in the Hall

The Savile Club From 1868

by

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having already inveighed against the antique divorce laws in his novel *Holy Deadlock*, he was now able to achieve the distinction of having his Matrimonial Causes Act put on the statute book as a private Member's bill during his first year in parliament.

Four years after becoming a member of the Savile he began to apply himself to the theatre; *Riverside Nights*, a revue at the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith, was his first venture, which was followed by a series of operettas, *La Vie Parisienne, Tantivy Towers* and *Derby Day*, culminating in perhaps his greatest success, *Bless the Bride*, produced in 1950. His love of sailing and life on the water – particularly the River Thames – was reflected in his novel *The Water Gipsies* published in 1930 and when at the outbreak of war in 1939 he put his converted canal boat *Water Gipsy* at the disposal of the Royal Naval Auxiliary Patrol defending the Thames he was given the rank of petty officer and the right to fly the white ensign. Meantime and subsequently he continued his crusades through every medium available to him, notably the correspondence columns of *The Times* and other influential journals. His campaign against purchase tax on books, for instance, was so vehemently expressed in a speech in the House of Commons and elsewhere that it caused the chancellor of the exchequer hastily to change his mind while his other philippics on behalf of such favourite obsessions as a public lending right for authors and passenger traffic services on the Thames achieved equally satisfactory albeit less speedy results. He received his knighthood in Sir Winston Churchill's resignation honours list of 1945 but in 1950 this 'independent Member *par excellence*' as he had been described in *The Times* was deprived of his parliamentary soap box with the abolition of the university franchise by a socialist government. In his time his various interests had been expressed as a trustee of the National Maritime Museum, president of the London Corinthian Sailing Club, president of the Inland Waterways Association, president of the Society of Authors, and vice-president of the Performing Rights Society. He was appointed a Companion of Honour in 1970. His connection with the Savile was further emphasized, if not, perhaps, reinforced, by his daughter, Crystal, who having married one member, John Pudney, decided she preferred another so took advantage of her father's Matrimonial Causes Act to become the wife of Lionel Hale.

* * * *

The Savile has provided a welcome haven for some of Britain's leading poets; Hardy, Bridges, Newbolt, Kipling and Yeats were but the forerunners of a distinguished line which continues to the present day.

Patric Dickinson, the translator of Aristophanes and himself a poet of particular worth and individual voice, was proposed for the Club by W.J. Turner – the rival monologist to Yeats. "Walter was a brilliant man", says Patric, "a fine poet, a music critic of originality, and foresight and insight. I loved his Australian accent and his formidable directness. 'Christ! It was bloody awful!' he said of a broadcast of his poems I produced. It was too. I had got the wrong reader, and knew it. He

said this to me loudly in the Sandpit which was then the bar. Nobody minded . . ." Then, after describing Walter's conversational encounters with Yeats, Patric recalls "...Now Yeats was dead, Walter was supreme, but he too, alas, suddenly died. I think of Walter's dangling eyeglass that bounced a bit as he got stouter, his marvellous spiky speech and appalling spiky handwriting" – the latter comment, as friends of Patric might aver, being very much a case of the poet calling the kettle black.

Turner's conversational style was not, it seems, always so rapturously regarded. Michael Meyer in his memoirs *Not Prince Hamlet* catalogues him, along with the elderly Compton Mackenzie, among the less captivating conversationalists in the Savile talkathon:

> Another tedious member was the Irish poet W.J. Turner, author of the splendid "Romance" about Chimborazo and Cotopaxi ("when I was but thirteen or so..."). He was tall and spidery, and had a way of turning across you as he sat beside you on a sofa and grasping your lapel, so that there was no means of escape. My father suggested that I should have a special coat made with detachable lapels, so that I could slip away leaving him still clutching one of them in his hand. What made it worse was that the poor man had very bad breath. However, he was, like Mackenzie, a kindly man, so that one could not be brusque as one would have been had the offender been Major Pollard.

(Of the brusqueness-worthy Major Pollard more anon).

Patric Dickinson remembers also "talking poetry" in the Sandpit with that enigmatic Savile writer and poet Richard Church, whose autobiography *Over the Bridge* caused some consternation when in it he referred quite casually to his habit as a young man of indulging in levitation to avoid traffic jams on his way to work.

> We became firm friends [says Patric]. Years later, Dick asked me, in the bar, what I thought was his best poem. This is a formidable question. I was able to answer at once and unequivocally, *The Lamp*. He blushed scarlet with pleasure, as old men seldom do. It is a most moving grim and tender narrative poem of the French Resistance, one of the least known of his works but for him, too, the best....

Again, in a Club of such catholic tastes there had to be a contrary view. John Hadfield recalls:

> I was sitting in the Sandpit one hot summer's evening with my old and dear friend Richard Church when Gilbert Harding appeared from the bar, perspiring and carrying his jacket. Stopping in front of Richard Church he said: "I am fond of you, Richard. You are one of the very nicest members of this Club. It's a pity that you are not a better writer."

Sir Harold Acton, whose first recorded blow in defence of poetry was to trumpet Eliot's *The Waste Land* through a megaphone from his college rooms at Christ Church to edify a passing rowing crew (as is famously recorded in *Brideshead Revisited*), had his earliest poems published by a fellow member of the Savile. Thomas Balston of Duckworths, "a retiring bachelor of fine taste" as Sir Harold modestly admits, published *Aquarium* and *An Indian Ass*. These were followed by a series of works on Chinese poetry and drama, deriving from Sir Harold's years as a lecturer in English literature at Peking University; the classic *The Bourbons of Naples* and, perhaps his best known work, *Memoirs of an Aesthete*. Elected in 1927, Sir Harold, perhaps the most famous recent apostle of aestheticism, was made a life member in 1989.

A poet of very different kind was John Pudney, who was elected in 1949 and who died in 1977. John Sleigh Pudney was born in 1909 and in 1933 his first volume of verse, *Spring Encounter*, was published by Methuen, which brought him into the literary circle of the formidable Lady Ottoline Morrell, wife of Philip Morrell, one of the chief protagonists in a famous Savile scandal – as will be seen later – and mother-in-law to another equally notable and daunting member, the Russian aristocrat and scholar, Igor Vinogradov.

The success of this first collection encouraged Pudney to devote himself entirely to writing, though after his marriage to A.P. Herbert's daughter, Crystal, he found it necessary to take jobs at *The Listener* and as a writer-producer in the B.B.C. where he was concerned with some of the first broadcasts of music by his erstwhile schoolmate Benjamin Britten. His first novel, *Jacob's Ladder*, was published in 1938 and in 1940 he was commissioned into the R.A.F. as an Intelligence officer and later to the newly formed Air Ministry "Creative Writers' Unit". During the invasion of France he was with General Leclerc's troops when they liberated Paris but, characteristically, regarded this as merely an opportunity to be the first to visit Picasso in his studio. Although he had had no training as a fighting man he endured many hazardous encounters which inspired him to remark that he must have been the only wartime officer who "never fired a shot except in anger".

Pudney will, of course, be long remembered for one of the best-known poems of the Second World War. It was first published in the *News Chronicle* in 1941, broadcast on radio by Laurence Olivier and spoken by Michael Redgrave in the film *The Way to the Stars* directed by Anthony Asquith in 1945.

Do not despair
For Johnny-head-in-air;
He sleeps as sound
As Johnny underground.

Fetch out no shroud
For Johnny-in-the-cloud;
And keep your tears
For him in after years.

Better by far
For Johnny-the-bright-star;
To keep your head,
And see his children fed.

He wrote many other considerable war poems though "Johnny-head-in-air" was the one which latched on to the public's consciousness. After the war he returned to journalism and made an unsuccessful bid to be elected to Parliament as a Labour candidate at Sevenoaks in the 1945 election. He went on to publish a considerable body of verse which is now unjustifiably neglected and ten novels, of which the most successful was *The Net*, published in 1952. However, he had now succumbed to the curse whch afflicts so many of those who take up the lonely profession of writing. His addiction to "Sodality" and "Convivium" as an antidote to the solitary working hours led to what he euphemistically called "Overdrinking". As a result his marriage to Crystal Herbert was dissolved in 1955 and she proceeded to marry his fellow member, Lionel Hale, another distinguished Savile author. A nervous committee made it discreetly known that one or other – maybe even both – might feel it tactful to resign, whereupon they both met in the bar to discuss this possibility and draft a joint reply that if it was all the same to the other members they would rather stay and continue to enjoy the Club. The committee concurred; and they did. Incidentally, Michael Ayrton and Nigel Balchin had a similar problem and dealt with it in the same way.

With characteristic bravery, Pudney made up his mind in 1965 to overcome his alcoholism. This he managed to do and wrote a book about it in an effort to reduce the stigma with which the condition is generally regarded. In 1976 he developed a hideously painful cancer of the throat from which he died the following year. A writer to the last, and with the same superhuman courage, he wrote a description of the progress of the disease and the process of dying in *Thank Goodness for Cake*, published posthumously in 1978, perhaps one of the most moving works ever to have come from a Savile member's pen.

John Pudney's early acquaintance with Auden may have had only a peripheral influence on his literary career but a much stronger connection exists with a present member of the Club, Sir Stephen Spender. Indeed Auden's first book, *Poems*, published in 1928, was privately printed by Spender in an edition of 45 copies and his name, together with those of another member, Cecil Day-Lewis, Christopher Isherwood and, later, Louis MacNeice, was most commonly associated with the "new" movement in the poetry of the 'thirties which was strongly inspired by social and political motives. Stephen Spender (as he then was) was elected to the Savile in 1943 and, at the time of writing, in his eighty-second year is still maintaining a literary output which would be the despair of lesser men. "A poet of distinction and a critic of discrimination, a novelist, a full-time autobiographer and part-time dramatist, co-founder of the magazines *Horizon*, *Encounter* and *Index on Censorship*", as *The Times* explained on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, "it is hard to imagine any other literary activity in which Sir

Stephen might have busied himself, short of book binding and calligraphy."

When he was knighted in 1983 he had ruefully to remember an early "gaffe with the power to raise a ghost"; on a Channel crossing when he was seventeen he had happened to sit next to an earlier Savilian, Sir Henry Newbolt, and had discussed with him poets they admired. Spender remarked about one in particular, "Well, I can't like the work of a poet who has a title."

But literary men are not always remembered for literary matters at the Savile: Patric Dickinson, musing that "... in 1945-55 the balance of members tended more to the arts than it does now", recollects that

> in the S.E. corner of the dining-room under the window was, and still is, a table for two. One day there was John Betjeman lunching with Stephen Spender. It is not usual for dramatic events to happen in club dining rooms. Suddenly there was a crack, a crash, and there was John on the floor in the midst of a disintegrated chair. The long table was silenced, the room was loud with John's laughter and Stephen's embarrassment. But nobody at the Savile stops talking for long....

For his eightieth birthday in 1989 the Savile organized one of its more Lucullan Soirées to celebrate Sir Stephen's years of membership and, as Patric Dickinson observed on the other occasion, nobody stopped talking for long. It is a pity that one of Spender's old friends, one of the more brilliant talkers in recent times, another Savile poet, Henry Reed, could not have been present.

Like several of his lyrical colleagues at the Savile, Henry brought translations of his classical predecessors as well as his own distinctive verse to a wider public through the medium of radio, and like Spender and Pudney he had been much influenced in his youth by Auden; like Pudney too he had served in Intelligence during the war and had produced one of the most famous poems in English to come out of it – "Naming of Parts". In 1946 his fellow Savilian Edward Sackville-West persuaded him to write a dramatization for radio of *Moby Dick* which was produced a year later featuring two other Savile members, Ralph Richardson and Bernard Miles. It won the Premio della Radio Italiana and established Henry with the critics as a radio dramatist with a rare poetic gift.

In 1970 a collection of his poems, *The Lessons of War*, was published to wide acclaim and in 1971 the texts of his poetic dramas for radio were published as *The Streets of Pompeii. A Very Great Man* and its sequels *Hilda Tablet and Others* also appeared, between them revealing much of the man himself, a master of comedy with a deeply sombre interior. In manner and appearance he resembled a classically educated Tony Hancock, presenting a lugubrious exterior from which emanated surprising flashes of wit. Many contemporary members will retain happy memories of evenings spent in his company. On one occasion when he was suffering one of his regular bouts of financial starvation he regaled the long table with an account of his appearance that morning before the magistrates to explain his inability to pay the rates: "And what, Mr Reed, is your profession?" asked the

magistrate. Diffidently, Henry admitted that he was a poet. "Yes, yes," said the magistrate testily, "but what do you do for a *living?*"

The ghost of Yeats at the Savile must be well pleased to have its chains so eloquently rattled by a contemporary member, Donald Davie, the distinguished poet, critic and academic who has on several occasions conducted the Yeats summer school at Sligo. Davie's academic career has included lectureships at Trinity College, Dublin; Cambridge, Essex, and long periods in the USA as Professor of Poetry at Stanford and Vanderbilt, where he is Emeritus Professor. There is at least one other member of the Club who, nearly forty years later, remembers that at T.C.D., where lectures were compulsory, and therefore never attended, Davie's sparkling performances were the only ones that were ever guaranteed a full house. Donald Davie was elected to the Savile in 1966 and has endowed the Monument with his several volumes of collected poems and critical essays. A new edition of his collected poems is due for publication over the next ten years and the first volume, *Under Briggflatts*, published in 1989, has already joined its fellows in the Monument.

There have been, and indeed are, many other Savilians who have written poetry of distinction but they, possibly bearing in mind the magistrate's implicit criticism of Henry Reed, have done so while earning their living otherwise.

George Buchanan, who had been a member since 1929 and who died in 1989, was an administrator who had been at one time chairman of the Town and Country Development Council of Northern Ireland but had later returned to a more congenial cultural ambience as a member of the Executive Council of the European Society, eventually becoming president of the London centre. Between whiles he wrote novels, criticism and verse. As his friend, fellow Savilian and writer, Vincent Brome, wrote in *The Guardian*:

> His forays into literature proper embraced all forms and his versatility makes him difficult to assess as a writer. The role he most respected was that of the poet, and he published several volumes of collected verse including *Bodily Responses* and *Conversations with Strangers*. Their quality varied and he only found his true "voice" in his later works, one of the most successful being *Inside Traffic*.

Brome recalled that "A great admirer of the literary salon tradition, Buchanan was a *bon vivant* and his dinner parties and poetry readings became a part of the literary London season. Gentle and benign, he presided over these with an implacable good humour capable of accommodating some of the most eccentric characters in the literary scene. Dismayed by what he regarded as the dissemination of inaccurate cultural information he once said: 'It's not so much people's ignorance that matters: it's their knowing so many things that ain't so.' "

Another Savile poet who hid his light under a different bushel was David Cleghorn-Thomson, who was tipped to be a future prime minister while he was president of the Oxford Union but at the age of twenty-nine was diverted into

becoming the first Scottish Regional Director of the BBC. He published "slim volumes" of verse which deserve a wider audience and among them is to be found a wondrous evocation of his fellow member and life-long friend, Dallas Bower, in a poem which every new member should be required to learn by heart as part of the entrance fee, "Parmigiano".

David Hardman, who died in 1989, was a poet and politician whose work in the one field probably cut short his career in the other. When he was elected to the Savile in 1946 he was Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Education in the recently formed Attlee administration, and he soon established for himself a prominent place in the current Saviliana. As a student at Christ's College, Cambridge he created something of a record by becoming the first avowedly socialist president of the Cambridge Union. For nearly fifty years he was secretary of the Sir Ernest Cassell Educational Trust and was closely associated with the Workers' Educational Association. He was a lecturer much in demand both here and in America for his discourses on a wide variety of subjects, from politics and local government to Shakespeare, about whom he wrote a well-received work of popular scholarship. Unfortunately for his political career he published a rather robust collection of poetry, *Poems of Love and Affairs*, just before the general election of 1951 which caused his outraged constituents at Darlington to confer upon him the doubtful distinction of being one of the only two Labour front-benchers to lose their seats.

Basil Saunders among many others has relaxed from his labours, in his case as a public relations executive and administrator for such organizations as The Wellcome Foundation, A.S.L.I.B., and the Arts Council, to produce similar personal insights in a volume entitled *Crackle of Thorns* and promises to publish more when the time is ripe. He has also, in common with other Savilians such as Kenneth Haigh, Simon Oates, Roger Braban and Charles Hodgson, been a reader at the many poetry evenings which have accompanied celebratory dinners to sing the Club's poetric heritage. Just before he died, Sir Ralph Richardson remarked that "there is almost certainly no other club in the world which could have staged so many distinguished events to honour their own members and also manage to round up so many other chaps about the house to do it so beautifully."

* * * *

But despite this poetic Pantheon, novelists still predominated, at least numerically, in the literary history of the Savile. Francis Brett Young had been elected in 1920. As a qualified doctor, practising in Devon, he began to write novels "in between epidemics" and of these early works *The Dark Tower,* published in 1915, is perhaps the best known. In the First World War he served with the R.A.M.C. in East Africa, which seriously affected his health; and during his long convalescence he wrote *The Crescent Moon* and a collection, *Poems*, published in 1919. Although it had yet to attract much public attention his literary skill had evidently been already recognized by his peers for he had been proposed for the