

# FIFTEEN UNPUBLISHED LETTERS OF A. E. HOUSMAN

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DR. A. S. W. ROSENBAACH, the eminent American rare-book dealer, quotes an unknown author in a *Book Hunter's Holiday*:

Lives of great men all remind us  
As their pages o'er we turn,  
That we're apt to leave behind us  
Letters that we ought to burn.

But in a more serious vein, others are inclined to agree with Goethe: "We lay aside letters never to read them again, and at last we destroy them out of discretion and so disappears the most beautiful, the most immediate breath of life, irrecoverably for ourselves and for others."

As for the letters of A. E. Housman, they most certainly give us "the most immediate breath of life," but he probably would have preferred their being burned. However, almost 700 letters from his pen have been published, mainly for the reason which his brother Laurence Housman gives for printing a selection of more than 120 of them in *A. E. H.: Some Poems, Some Letters and a Personal Memoir by his brother*—"its interest lying not so much in its biographical detail as in its portrayal of character." It is probably for this same reason that Housman's publisher Grant Richards printed about 465 letters and post-cards in *Housman: 1897-1936*, the largest group yet to be published. Several other writers on A. E. Housman have each added a few letters; Houston Martin included 11 in his "With Letters from Housman" in the December, 1936 *Yale Review*; Dr. Percy Withers cited 14 in *A Buried Life*; Cyril Clemens printed 38 in "A. E. Housman and His Publishers" *Mark Twain Quarterly*, Summer-Fall, 1941; and I myself found 14 for "More Housman Letters" in the *Mark Twain Quarterly*, Spring, 1943.

Since 1943 I have discovered 15 unpublished letters by Housman. They refer to personal matters, dealings with his publisher, permission to reprint from his poetry, signing copies of his books, and some critical remarks. When I saw them they were in the hands of various Housman collectors and dealers, who have given permission for publication and whose kindness I wish to acknowledge: Mr. H. Bacon Collamore of Hartford, Conn (Nos. 6,7,8,9,12,15); Dr. Herman T. Radin of New York City

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(Nos. 11,13,14); Mr. Charles E. Feinberg of Detroit (Nos. 1,3,4,10); the Chiswick Bookshop of New York City (No. 5); and James F. Drake, Inc. of New York City (No. 2).

I

The first letter was written from Venice on the stationery of the Hotel Europa, where he said he always stayed in that city because it had "absolutely the best possible situation and is not too large. In dignity, according to my gondolier, it ranks next to Danieli's."

6 Sept., 1901

Dear Mr. Brown,

I shall be very pleased to lunch with you and Mrs. Brown on Sunday. Apparently I nearly encountered you both yesterday afternoon, for Andrea tells me you were on one side of Lido while I was on the other.

Yours very truly  
A. E. Housman

The Mr. Brown to whom the letter was sent was a friend of Housman, Horatio F. Brown, in whose copy of *A Shropshire Lad* appears an interesting inscription:

T. E. B.  
from  
H. F. B.  
Isle of Man. Venice  
22. xi. 96

I bought six copies of this book when it came out and gave them all away. Later on I wanted a first edition & gave an order to a second-hand bookseller. He sent me this copy which I had given to T. E. Brown [author of *Fo'c'sle Yarns*].

Horatio F. Brown

Nov. 7, 1922. Venice. Year that *Last Poems* appeared.

Housman's fame as a poet spread slowly; although *A Shropshire Lad* had gone through a few small editions it was not until World War I that it approached the "best-seller" class. Thus the following letter is one of the early requests for a contribution from A. E. H. For between 1896 (when the *Lad* first appeared) and 1907, only two of his serious poems were published in magazines—"Illic Jacet" in *The Academy* for 24 February 1900 and "The Olive" in *The Outlook* for 7 June 1902.

The letter is addressed to The Editor, *Country Life*, and is written on a University College, London letterhead:

7 Nov., 1907

Dear Sir,

I am obliged by your proposal, but several causes, of which barrenness is the chief, prevent me from contributing verses to periodical publications.

I am yours faithfully

A. E. Housman

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From 1892 until 1911 Housman was Professor of Latin at University College, leaving London to become Kennedy Professor of Latin at the University of Cambridge. The next postal is sent to his publishers, Messrs. Grant Richards & Co., 7 Carlton Street, Regent Street, [London] S. W. One wonders why he wants a copy of his own book and why he must make a guess at the price.

Trinity College, Cambridge

11 Nov. 1911

I shall be obliged if you would send me one copy of the 2/6 edition (I think that is the price) of *A Shropshire Lad*.

A. E. Housman

4

While Housman almost invariably refused permission for his poems to be included in anthologies or newspapers—except in the case of American publishers, over whom he had no copy-right control—he was generally ready for his verses to be set to music. Thus dozens of composers on both sides of the Atlantic have written settings to *A Shropshire Lad* and *Last Poems*, the most successful probably being Ralph Vaughan Williams, Graham Peele, George Butterworth, and C. W. Orr. The brief note that follows is typical of many that appear in *Housman: 1897-196* by Grant Richards (to whom I think it was sent, though the envelope is missing.)

Trinity College, Cambridge

22 April 1913

Dear Sir,

Mr. Crippen [?] may print the five poems with his music.

Yours faithfully

A. E. Housman

## 5

The most interesting, as well as the longest, of these letters, is the one printed next, sent to F. C. Owlett. The Mrs. Taylor whom Housman refers to is Rachel Annand Taylor, author of *Poems* (1904), *Rose and Vine* (1908), *Hours of Fiammetta* (1909), and the prose works *Aspects of the Italian Renaissance* (1923), *Leonardo the Florentine* (1927), and *William Dunbar* (1931). She is called by the editors of *Today's Literature* (New York, 1935, p. 455), "next to Fiona MacLeod, the greatest poet her country [Scotland] has produced in modern times, and one of the finest women poets who have written in English."

Trinity College  
Cambridge  
18 March 1924

Dear Mr. Owlett,

Gilbert Murray introduced me some 12 years ago to Mrs Taylor's poems, and I admired the beauty and richness of their ornament. I do not put her first among living women poets in this country: I will not provoke your wrath and scorn by saying whom I do; especially as you have on your side "names from which there would be no appeal." But there are no such names really: contemporary criticism is always fallible: think of Lamb and Shelley. It is very unreasonable for people to be depressed by unfavorable reviews: they should say to themselves "do I write better than Wordsworth and Shelley and Keats? am I worse treated than they were?"

I am yours very truly

A. E. Housman

## 6

By 1928, the date of the next letter, Housman's place in English Literature was secure, *Last Poems* having achieved as great acclaim as any book of verse in recent times. He must also have been annoyed by visitors and letterwriters, as the letter shows him in a mood which had come to be characteristic.

Trinity College,  
Cambridge, England  
27 March 1928

Dear Mr. Leippert:

I cannot forbid you to write to me but you must not expect replies. I hate writing and my relatives and friends very seldom get letters from me.

Lucan would do you no good. He has rhetoric and epigram but no true poetry. My edition [Blackwell, 1926] is for advanced scholars and is scientific—not literary.

The authorized publishers of the "Shropshire Lad" in the United States are Messrs. Holt. I am

Yours sincerely,

A. E. Housman

## 7

No matter how widespread Housman's reputation as a difficult person to approach, many found him kind and courteous, as did I. R. Brussel, a book-scout then in London. The illustrations of which Housman writes were by William Hyde for the 1908 edition of the *Lad*. "Coloured plates", he said of them, "always strike me as vulgar", and he came to detest the Hyde drawings only less than those of Claud Lovat Fraser. Of the latter he said, "To transpose into the 18th century a book which begins with Queen Victoria's jubilee is the act of a rhinoceros. I should look a fool if I allowed the book to appear with these decorations." No illustrator or composer, working with *A Shropshire Lad*, ever satisfied Housman, who said they were wrapped in their own art, merely used the author as a peg to hang things on, and had "less than ordinary human allowance of sense and feeling."

17 August 1930

Dear Mr. Brussel,

I shall not be in Cambridge till the end of the month; but if you will then send the book to Trinity College, enclosing an envelope suitable for returning it, I shall be pleased to write my name in it, though I do not approve of the illustrations.

Yours very truly

A. E. Housman

## 8

The next letter is also to I. R. Brussel, sent to his home, in Brooklyn. He has apparently asked Housman about titles to his poems.

Trinity College  
Cambridge  
England  
16 Feb. 1931

Dear Mr. Brussel,

I find it a trouble to invent titles for poems, and do not think it worth while. I am not alone in this: for instance many of Bridges' *Shorter Poems* have no titles.

Yours very truly

A. E. Housman

## 9

Meanwhile, other collectors were sending Housman copies of books for him to sign. He often added a correction or two. The letter below is concerned with Alfred W. Pollard's edition of *Odes from the Greek Dramatists* (Stott, 1890), for which A. E. H. made three translations. This work appeared six years before *Shropshire Lad*, but previous to the *Odes* no less than six pieces by Housman had been published: "The Death of Socrates" (1874), "Parta Quies" (1881), "New Year's Eve" (1881), "A Morning with the Royal Family" (1882), "Hendecasyllables" (1882), and "Fragment of a Greek Tragedy" (1883). The correction which he has made is changing "Far-seeking" to "Far seeking", the sort of misprint that always annoyed him. Incidentally, this error persisted even in the posthumous *Collected Poems* (Cape, 1939).

Trinity College  
Cambridge  
England  
22 May 1931

Dear Mr. Rubin,

The translations in this book are not the first things of mine, which appeared in print; but I have made and initialled a correction of a misprint on p. 109.

I am amused to hear of Dr. Einstein being your guest: certainly a great honour to the Group.

Yours sincerely

A. E. Housman

## 10

Once more Housman is asked to sign, for an unknown collector, copies of his books, and again he comments on a misprint in *Last Poems*.

Trinity College  
Cambridge  
8 Aug. 1931

Dear Sir,

I return your copies of *A Shropshire Lad* and *Last Poems* with my signature.

The missing comma and semicolon on p. 52 of the latter mean that it belongs to the first issue (4000 copies) of the first edition.

Yours very truly,

A. E. Housman

11

In matters of religion, A. E. H's position is probably best stated by himself in answer to a questionnaire sent by Maurice Pollet, a French admirer: "I was brought up in the Church of England and in the High Church party, which is much the best religion I have ever come across. But Lemprière's Classical Dictionary, which fell into my hands when I was eight, attached my affections to paganism. I became a deist at 13 and atheist at 21." With this in mind, one finds the following letter to the Rev. Delos O'Brian of Gardener, Mass., a bit unusual.

Trinity College  
Cambridge  
3 Dec. 1932

Dear Mr. O'Brian,

I have had no photograph taken for many years, but in the ambition of decorating your vestry I enclose one which belongs to the time when I was writing *A Shropshire Lad*.

I am yours very truly,

A. E. Housman

12

It may have been simply perversity on Housman's part to give permission to composers to set his poems to music and yet refuse permission to editors to use his poems in anthologies. But in agreeing to sign copies of *A Shropshire Lad* and refusing to sign *The Name and Nature of Poetry*, he was doing what he could to show his displeasure with the Leslie Stephen Lecture which he delivered at Cambridge on 9 May 1933. When Grant Richards asked him to inscribe his copy of the published lecture, A. E. H. replied, "I'm damned if I will. I don't like the lecture. It gave me a great deal of trouble. I was over-persuaded into writing it. I wrote every line against my will. I shall inscribe no copy to anyone." Thus this next letter to I. R. Brussel is in the proper key.

Trinity College  
Cambridge  
7 July 1933

Dear Mr. Brussel,

I return the copy of *A Shropshire Lad* with my signature added; but I have refused all requests to sign copies of the lecture, because I do not think much of it, and wrote it against the grain.

Yours sincerely

A. E. Housman

13 & 14

The two following letters are merely routine thank-you notes addressed to Ellis D. Robb of Atlanta, Georgia. They are from a busy professor 74 years old who still took time to answer his many correspondents in a pleasant manner.

Trinity College  
Cambridge, England  
10 July 1933

Dear Mr. Robb:

I do not know of any English publication except the Times Literary Supplement which would answer to your description.

Thanks for the diverting cutting from the New York *Herald Tribune*.

Yours sincerely

A. E. Housman

Trinity College  
Cambridge  
England  
24 Nov. 1933

Dear Mr. Robb,

I am much obliged to your kindness in sending me the review of Sara Teasdale's poems.

Yours very truly

A. E. Housman

15

If there was one thing that seemed to plague Housman during his poetic life, it was misprints in *A Shropshire Lad* and *Last Poems*, which he said he "corrected again and again, and the filthy beasts of printers for ever introduce them anew". He thought no one in the world "at once so stupid and so conceited as printers," who had a propensity for altering MSS,



"as if they knew better than the author how to punctuate. So, as ever, in this last letter A. E. H. remarks on an error: the 1908 edition of *A Shropshire Lad*, where he has found an unnecessary comma at the end of line 10 on page 41. Also in writing to P. Ayres, Esq. of Emmanuel, Forest Rise, Whipp Cross, E. 17, he tells of two changes he made in the text of *th Lad* in 1923: in XXXVIII, 8, "Thick on the wind are sown" became "Loose on the wind are sown"; and LII, 9, "He hears long since forgotten" became "He hears: no more remembered." About two months after this letter was written, on 30 April 1936, Housman died.

Trinity College  
Cambridge  
18 Feb. 1936

Dear Sir,

I thought that the text of this edition was quite correct; but I have found an error on p. 41, so I cannot be sure that there are no others.

On pp. 78 and 105 I have made alterations which were introduced in 1923 and which the author meant to be improvements. Unfortunately the paper does not take ink well.

Yours very truly

A. E. Housman

Thus in these brief hitherto unpublished letters we get once more a glimpse into the personality of a great poet. For it is in Housman letters that, as Samuel Johnson said of someone else almost 200 years ago, "his soul lies naked, his letters are only the mirror of his heart: Whatever passes within him is shown undisguised in its natural process."