

John Cowper Powys's obituary for the Rev. Henry Robinson King, 1935.

The Rev. Henry Robinson King (1855-1935) taught at Sherborne School from 1883 to 1925. Known by his pupils as 'Crusoe', he was held in particularly high esteem by the Powys brothers. John Cowper Powys described him in *Autobiography* (1934) as 'our life-long friend and well-loved master', and Littleton Charles Powys noted that 'HRK meant more to him [John] than any other master excepting I think old Wildman'.



John and Littleton had arrived in the Rev. King's form IVA in Lent term 1888, where John remained for three terms (Lent-Michaelmas 1888) and Littleton for two (Lent-Trinity 1888). They were followed into form IVA by Albert Reginald Powys (Michaelmas 1896-Michaelmas 1897) and Llewelyn Powys (Michaelmas 1901-Michaelmas 1902). William Ernest Powys never made it beyond form IVB, but John's son Littleton Alfred Powys, 29 years after his father, spent two terms in the Rev. King's form (Michaelmas 1917-Lent 1918).

The Rev. King died on 28 September 1935, aged 80, and his funeral was held in Sherborne School chapel on 1 October 1935. John Cowper Powys was asked by Reginald Stanley Thompson (1899-1994), a master at Sherborne School, to write the Rev. King's obituary for the school magazine, *The Shirburnian*:

Letter from John Cowper Powys to R.S. Thompson, 10 October 1935:

7 Cae Coed, Corwen, Merionethshire, N. Wales, Oct. 10th 1935.

Dear Mr Thompson

I appreciate extremely your writing to me about your notices of H.R.K. for *The Shirburnian*.

I am not in a position to do what could be exactly called a "Memoir" of him; but I am enclosing (though being rather out in the wilds I haven't got it typed for you) a note of general impression of him & his influence upon the School at that early date.

Do not hesitate, Mr Thompson, to cut it as short as you like or even to change it in any particular – for I know well the exigencies of Editorial Officers and I also know the special exigencies of School Magazines!

And indeed let me assure you sir that my feelings won't be hurt one bit if your editorial people feel they haven't space to use it after all – because I rather expect you will want a definitive memoir of that period, which I really cannot offer. But supposing you got someone to do that part, (before G.O'H. [Geoffrey O'Hanlon] takes it on in 1908) if he did it really briefly, you could perhaps add a few excerpts from mine as a sort of additional character-sketch from the old "4 A" point of view!

I do very much indeed value the fact that you asked me for a contribution.

Yours sincerely

John Cowper Powys

John Cowper Powys's obituary for the Rev. Henry Robinson King, *The Shirburnian*, November 1935, pp.218-226:

My knowledge of the biographical details of H.R.K.'s life amounts to little, but the general impression he made upon my youth was so great that I would like to attempt a sort of impressionistic pen-portrait of the man. My memories go back pretty far, to the later "eighties" in fact of the last century. I think of him as a bachelor, living in a pleasant room surrounded by his favourite books, from which he emerged in magisterial punctuality to make his way to his familiar classroom. The first and, indeed, the only personal overture of friendship, if such a word can be used, that I ever received from a master other than W.B. Wildman, brought me one wet afternoon to call upon him in this retreat. He had been ill – a very unusual

thing with him – and I found him extended on a sofa under the care of his sister, a lady with whom, later in my life, I had the privilege of staying when travelling in the north as an “Extension Lecturer.”

This visit to H.R.K. was a memorable one to me, not so much from any scholastic or literary point of view, for I was too young to respond very far in that direction, but as a sign that apart from any professional connection here was a friendly human relation offered to me between a scholarly grown man and a morbidly self-distrusting boy. And it is the same with all my memories of him. In those days any unofficial contact between masters and boys was comparatively rare. Most of the masters in the “eighties” were bearded elderly men who had their own interests quite apart from the School. Only a few of them were young enough to play games; and, at the particular epoch of which I am thinking, those who did play games were rarely the ones with any marked literary or humanistic culture. The tremendous influence exerted over me by H.R.K. was due, I think, to the fact that with all his devotion to the School he never failed to suggest to me an ideal of cultivated and sensitive human life *apart from his profession*.

In the “eighties” the other young masters had, if I’m not mistaken, except for my own housemaster, W.B. Wildman, each his own particular game or sport or passion or hobby. They certainly did not convey to my mind in my early teens any striking ideal of humanistic, well-rounded culture or of “The Good Life” in the old classical sense. But this is precisely what H.R.K. always did. His founding of “The Duffers” at a much later epoch was, I can bear witness, only the culmination of a calm and steady humanistic influence exerted from the very start upon all with whom he came in contact. And what I most vividly appreciated in him was the absence of a certain rough jocularity, a certain boisterous facetiousness, that used to be the prevailing note among the other younger masters, and which I personally always found singularly disconcerting.

H.R.K. had that great – I had almost said that royal – gift of “saving the face”, as the Chinese say, of the people he casually encountered. He was always calm and controlled. He is the only master I ever had to do with whom I cannot recall losing his temper; rather did he possess this classic grace of heightening the self-respect of the boys he dealt with, instead of lowering it, which is what I most think of in connection with him. And what could be a more inspiring gift? Do not let me be mistaken. It was not one’s youthful conceit that he encouraged so nobly and wisely: it was one’s personal human dignity, that intimate self-respect upon which everything depends! And it was precisely this thing in one, so hard to define, that was so often disregarded in those days by the other masters, and so frequently outraged by the genial facetiousness of the younger.

Boys are not, I believe, so much influenced by the particular opinions of their elders as by the general atmosphere of their personal character and tastes. It was just here, I am sure, that H.R.K. was such an ideal master. I cannot remember one single dogmatic opinion ever expressed by him and yet the whole trend and swing of his life was as clearly cut and as definitely rounded-off as any classical work of art. His athleticism, that much was plain to my youthful mind, was always balanced by his intellectual interests. He was at once aesthetic and ascetic, a rare combination; and while he never lost his dignity – as our younger masters sometimes did – he would invariably make a point of respecting the far more touchy dignity of the queerest boys. A balanced human development was what he, I will not say, taught, but what he actually represented in his own person; and in thinking of what he meant to me, nearly half a century ago, it is upon this harmony of life that I feel tempted to lay the greatest stress.