

‘Mordaunt Ap Gryfith. A Tale’: an even earlier example of J.C. Powys’s literary talent?

In the 1986 issue of *The Powys Review* (vol.5, 2, no.18) Belinda Humfrey submitted an explanatory introduction to the first publication of John Cowper Powys’s earliest surviving story ‘Mordaunt Ap Gryfith. A tale.’ In her introduction, Ms Humfrey suggests that the manuscript was probably written by J.C. Powys in 1888, aged 16, while he was a pupil at Sherborne School. However, some recently discovered pupil lists for Sherborne Preparatory School suggest that the tale may well have been written by J.C. Powys much earlier, sometime between 1884 and July 1886 when he was aged between 12 and 13.

The manuscript of ‘Mordaunt Ap Gryfith. A tale’ was dedicated by J.C. Powys to ‘our greatly beloved head of the house, C.W. Harrison.’ Along with J.C. Powys and his brother Littleton, Cuthbert Woodville Harrison (1874-1946) joined Sherborne School in September 1886 but, as Ms Humfrey points out in her notes, the Powys brothers and Harrison were members of different houses at Sherborne School. The Powys brothers boarded at W.B. Wildman’s house, Mapperty in Westbury (now St Antony’s School House) and C.W. Harrison boarded at H.P. Price’s house on Greenhill (now Hilddrop House)¹. This suggests that J.C. Powys’ tale, dedicated to C.W. Harrison as ‘head of the house’, cannot have been written while he was a pupil at Sherborne School.

It now seems likely that the tale was in fact written by J.C. Powys while he, Littleton and C.W. Harrison were all pupils at Sherborne Preparatory School. The Powys brothers arrived at Sherborne Prep in May 1883 and remained until July 1886. A form list of pupils at Sherborne Prep in Midsummer 1883 shows the Powys brothers ranked 4th (Powys ma.) and 5th (Powys mi.) in the Second form. Unfortunately, no list of pupils for Midsummer 1884 has yet come to light, but one for Midsummer 1885 shows the Powys brothers ranked 5th (Powys ma.) and 7th (Powys mi.) in the First form, with Harrison tert. sandwiched between them ranked 6th. It would therefore appear that C.W. Harrison arrived at Sherborne Preparatory School sometime between Midsummer 1883 and Midsummer 1885. In the form list for Easter term 1886 Harrison tert. is top of the First form and winner of the Form Prize. Powys mi (Littleton) is 2nd and winner of the Examination Prize, and Powys ma (J.C. Powys) is ranked 3rd.

The Headmaster of Sherborne Preparatory School was then William Heitland Blake (1852-1916). His father was rector of Thurning in Norfolk and he was educated at Haileybury School and Jesus College Cambridge. In 1880, Blake was appointed Headmaster of Sherborne Preparatory School, which was then under the control of Sherborne School. Known to the boys as ‘Sailor Bill’ for his love of sailing², Blake was also a family friend of the Powys family³. The Prep School in 1883 was run from Westbury House (now Wessex House) opposite the Britannia Inn in Westbury, but in 1886 Blake moved the school to Acreman House in Acreman Street, which he had built at his own expense, breaking the Prep School’s connection with Sherborne School⁴. J.C. Powys reveals in his *Autobiography* that the move ‘from Westbury House to Acreman House made no impression of any kind on my mind. Important event as it must have been to W.H. Blake, it was a bagatelle to Powys ma.’⁵

Ms Humfrey suggests that J.C. Powys may have used books in Sherborne School library as source material for his tale. But it now seems likely that it was books in the Prep School library, of which Mr Blake made him the ‘librarian’⁶, that provided the historical detail and inspiration for ‘Mordaunt Ap Gryfith. A tale’. The library must have been a very good one, for Littleton remembered that ‘W.H. Blake was a man of considerable literary taste’⁷ and J.C. Powys acknowledged that Mr Blake ‘had a certain ‘penchant’ for literature.’⁸ In his *Autobiography*, J.C. Powys writes, ‘For I must put on record that thanks to the excellent library granted us by W.H. Blake I was often extremely happy at the Preparatory... Hour by hour I used to sit at the table in the Prep Playroom reading Jules Verne.’⁹ Littleton also acknowledged the importance of the Prep School library to John, stating in *The Joy of It* that ‘Long before he left the Prep John had read every book in the library and enjoyed the privilege of being allowed to borrow books from W.H. Blake’s own bookshelves.’¹⁰ It was also while at the Prep that John began to invent stories for the other boys, as Littleton reveals ‘He surpassed any boy I have ever come across... as a story teller. Every night he was turned on to tell his stories; his imagination was such and his power of description so vivid that often the boys in his dormitory would be so terrified that they would disappear beneath their bedclothes.’¹¹

J.C. Powys reveals in his *Autobiography* that one book he enjoyed reading during his time at the Prep was not in the library. This was Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*, written in 1844 and first translated into English in 1846. The novel was loaned to him by 'my closest Prep friend, a little boy of grave literary tastes, whom I used to name by the feminine name 'Tetine'.'¹² Could this have been Harrison tert., who was top of the First form in Easter 1886 and to whom J.C. Powys dedicated his tale? We know that C.W. Harrison was slight of stature for in 1893, aged 19, while studying Classics at Balliol College, he was cox in the Balliol 1st Torpid, weighing just 8 stone 10 oz.¹³ If Cuthbert William Harrison is J.C. Powys' 'Tetine', 'a boy I was very fond of then, a grave rather womanish child'¹⁴ he was the son of Cuthbert Harrison (1836-1911), a cotton broker, and Anne Frances Harrison (née Orred) of Dyrham in Gloucestershire. Cuthbert attended Sherborne School from September 1886 until April 1890¹⁵ and was evidently musical, performing for his house as a treble in the Glee Quintets and Glee Choir competitions in 1888 and 1889. However, his housemaster, Hugh Penderel Price, fell out very publicly with the Headmaster E.M. Young over a libel action Young brought against Price's fellow teacher Edward Malan. As a result Price left Sherborne in April 1890 for Weymouth College, taking a number of the boys with him. Cuthbert left Sherborne at the same time and finished off his education at Clifton College. After Balliol College, he went on to join the Malayan Civil Service, becoming in 1924 Commissioner of Lands in the Federated Malay States and drafting the Malaya Land Code, and in 1927 was appointed under-secretary to the Governor of the Federated Malay States. He wrote a number of books, including *Malay History* (1909-1911), *An Illustrated Guide to the Federated Malay States* (1910), *The Magic of Malaya* (1916), and *Some Notes on the Government Services in British Malaya* (1929). He also owned and trained racing ponies in Taiping and Kuala Lumpur and was a keen polo player. Cuthbert retired in 1927 and moved with his wife to Budleigh Salterton, where he died on 25 March 1946, aged 72.

I have not found any other references made by J.C. Powys to C.W. Harrison in his writings, but would be very interested to learn of any that members of the Powys Society may have found.

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¹ *The Sherborne Register 1550-1950* (1950).

² 'William Heitland Blake. An Appreciation', *The Shirburnian*, April 1917, p.34.

³ L.C. Powys, *The Joy of It* (1937), p.38.

⁴ *The Sherborne Register 1550-1950*, p.lxvi.

⁵ J.C. Powys, *Autobiography* (1967), p..98.

⁶ *Autobiography* (1967), p.83.

⁷ *The Joy of It*, p.63.

⁸ *Autobiography*, 82.

⁹ *Autobiography*, p.87.

¹⁰ *The Joy of It*, p. 61.

¹¹ *The Joy of It*, p. 61.

¹² *Autobiography*, p.87.

¹³ Balliol College Archives: Photograph of Balliol 1st Torpid team, 1893.

¹⁴ *Autobiography*, p.107.

¹⁵ *The Sherborne Register 1550-1950*.