

The following paper about Henry Robinson King was given by Francis King at a meeting of the Duffers held at Abbeylands on the 16 May 1948, and was reprinted in a booklet produced in 1948 to celebrate the 50th Year of the Duffers.

H.R.K.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is almost expected of readers of papers to learned societies such as the Duffers that they should begin with an apology or with thanks for the honour done them by the invitation, or with both. You must accept this paper without apology, but I do wish to say with all the emphasis and persuasiveness at my command that I feel in a quite peculiar way grateful and honoured in being invited to address the Duffers. It seems to me an altogether incredible event, that I should be now in the august position and myself responsible for the tedious and unmeaning drone that as children we used to listen to outside the drawing room door here at Abbeylands on Sunday afternoons, with the feelings compounded of curiosity, amusement and awe with which children regard the recreations and occupations of grown-ups. You must pardon the frankly reminiscent tone – here comes unbidden the apology that I promised to dispense with – the frankly reminiscent tone of this paper. I was invited to talk about my father and the part that literature played in his life and that of his family, and that surely allows me to be as reminiscent as I like. But I must be careful, for it is hard for me to realise that though I am speaking in Sherborne, in Abbeylands, and to Duffers, I am speaking to an audience of whom the majority knows my father only by hearsay, perhaps only as the founder and for many years dictator of this society. For their instruction I must give some biographical details.

My father was born in a Westmorland vicarage in 1855, in the second year of the Crimean War. He went to school at Clifton and then to Oxford, and attempted for a time to become a lawyer. At the age of 27 he gave up the attempt and accepted a temporary place at Sherborne in 1883. At the age of 43 he founded the Duffers and married a young Edinburgh woman 17 years younger than himself. Of their five children, two sons were at Sherborne [Alexander King (1904-1970) (Abbey House 1918-1923) & Charles Mason King (1910-1987) (Day boy & Abbey House 1924-1929)] and two were not [Henry King (1900-) & Francis William King (1907-1981)]; their only daughter [Constance Mary King (1902-1975)] married a distinguished past member of this society [Cecil Day Lewis], and has a son in Harper House [Nicholas Charles Day-Lewis (b.1934), Harper House 1947-1952]. Of their two Shirburnian sons, one must have read a paper more than once to this society; he is now a lecturer in English at the University of Western Australia [Alexander King (1904-1970)]. Otherwise he would be where I am now. I remember that in his last year at Sherborne my brother Alec read a paper to the Duffers which was wholly or mainly concerned with the poetry of Gertrude Stein, one of the most eccentric of the many experimental writers of the 20's. She is now perhaps generally forgotten, and I retain only a line of hers which began "Matches wear sacks." The paper was listened to with respect and tolerance, even by my father who, although he had no great respect for the poets of the 20's, had a great deal for the reader of the paper.

But I am going on too fast. Let us return to regard for a moment the five children of your founder outside the drawing room door at Abbeylands on a Sunday afternoon 35 years ago. I was then 6 [Francis William King (1907-1981)], and I never remember a time when 'Duffers' was not part of our life. It was not altogether a welcome part, for it withdrew our parents from our society half-way through the afternoon, and denied us access to Sunday tea in the drawing room. On the other hand there was the strangely exciting occupation of watching from the top of those stairs the arrival of the grown-ups (you all seemed very grown-up to a child of 6), the interest of seeing the drawing room furniture rearranged, and there were often some interesting leavings in the dining room when the company had departed. Duffers meetings in those days are inseparably bound up in my mind with a willow-pattern tea service, very thin slices of brown bread and butter and a remarkable sort of cake with a large hole in the middle (called, I think, 'Prima Donna' cake and obtainable at Ford's). My father had a right idea of the importance of eating and drinking for the success of his club. In his diary for 1899, he wrote: "On Sunday, Oct. 8th, the Duffers met. I read a paper on Great Gable. This literary club has survived to its 5th term (owing to dessert, etc.)." On Oct. 1898 he wrote: "The Duffers club met chez moi. I read a paper on Wordsworth and we read the poet afterwards. This literary club has actually attained its second season without going out." In July 1899

he was more optimistic: "The Duffers this afternoon considered Browning. They are rightly named, but the club is in its 4th term and will last."

There were always ladies present in those days and indeed through all the time that I can remember. I was talking recently to an O.S. of the period of the 20's, who described the intimidating effect of the presence of ladies upon the already dumb and unselfconfident member of school: I wonder if some of the ladies occasionally felt the atmosphere intimidating and whether any of them dared raise her voice in discussion. Of one thing I am sure, and that is that my father was never intimidated: no fear of public opinion or anxiety at being thought eccentric ever deterred him from doing or saying what he wanted to do or say.

It was inevitable that my father should found a literary society – or "club" as he originally called it – as inevitable as that he should want to read novels and recite poetry to his family. It is only strange that he postponed the founding of the Duffers till he was 43 years old and had been already 15 years at Sherborne. But he postponed many important things till middle age or even later. He married when he was 43, became a Housemaster at 45, had his first lesson in elocution at 52 ("25 years later than I ought"), took orders at 55 (at a time when he describes himself as "happy in health and new studies"), and the same year saw the birth of his youngest son [Charles Mason King (1910-1987)]. Under the year 1908, when he was 53, he first records that he recited poetry to his family, a practice that was to become a regular feature of our lives. In that year, at a time of life when most people find their capacity to memorise is beginning to decline, my father began to build up the immense store of memorised poetry which reached a total of about 500 lines by the end of that year and was destined in the next twenty years to reach the total of 10,000 lines. The extracts so learnt were all written in a manuscript book and were recited on solitary walks and bicycle rides which from the age of 50 became his regular afternoon recreation, ousting the conventional afternoon occupation of the Housemaster. He became less and less a player or watcher of games, and even began to forget that he had once found them interesting. I still possess this private anthology which fills four notebooks, chiefly with extracts from Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth. In Dec. 1970 he entered in his diary "Finished reading Paradise Lost Bk. IX aloud. Nearly all English literature is flimsy and eventually unsatisfying except Shakespeare, Milton and the best part (a very small part) of Wordsworth. Such is my deliberate judgment at 52 years." It was characteristic of my father to devote himself to a quite small number of authors whose works he read over and over again. He had none of the litterateur's desire to keep abreast of the times, to read the fashionable work of the moment: he was as unmoved by fashions in literature as by fashions in dress or politics or holidays. His constant companions on railway journeys and on walks and bicycling expeditions were two well-thumbed pocket editions of Milton and Wordsworth. Unlike many people who have been educated in the literature of Greece and Rome, my father constantly read the Greek and Latin classics for pleasure, but here again his habit was to return constantly to the same authors. Pocket editions of Plato, Juvenal, Homer and Horace always accompanied him on his holidays and were read and re-read, the date and place of each re-reading being always entered on the title page. There is no doubt that my father's enjoyment of fine literature was much enhanced by its association in his memory with the beauty of the places in which he read or recited it. We used to go for family holidays every summer either to the Lakes or to Scotland, and my father used often to visit his relations in the Lakes in Christmas and Easter holidays as well. In his last term at Oxford when he had decided on a legal career he wrote in his diary: "I do hope my life is destined to be spent in the North. I like the sound of the dismal old mountain wind better than sunshine." Fortune decided that he should fall in love with a school in Dorsetshire but the same fortune had led him to a profession which allowed him to spend a quarter of the year away from Sherborne and in company with the "dismal old mountain wind." He was neither fisherman nor artist: he preferred bathing in a mountain pool to fishing in it, and the sedentary or static moments that are spent by other lovers of mountain scenery with fishing rod or artist's brush in hand were spent by him reading the classics in the shelter of a rock or reciting Paradise Lost to the astonished mountain sheep.

It was in such circumstances also that his family received their first introduction to much English poetry. In the winter the privilege of hearing my father recite was normally reserved for the grown-ups who sat up to what we called 'late dinner'; but in the summer we often had some poetry after a picnic lunch or tea in the mountains. I describe it as a "privilege" and yet I don't think we regarded it so. Most of my father's poetical

repertoire was over the heads of the child under 14: we thought nothing of Wordsworth or Shakespeare or Milton: they were only part of that abstruse grown-up world which appeared to us both unintelligible and faintly ridiculous. Tennyson was better. We enjoyed the 'Lady of Shalot' and 'Blow, bugle, blow' which were part of the repertoire, though 'Come into the garden, Maud' seemed to me then, as it has seemed to me ever since, to be on the wrong side of the line that separates the sublime from the ridiculous. There was also a poem which began "I remember, I remember the house where I was born"; but best of all, there lingered in my father's memory, though he would fain perhaps have forgotten them, two prose fragments from a comic writer called Jerome K. Jerome. These were what his children most frequently clamoured for. I still remember the awful silence followed by uncomprehended laughter which greeted my request for "Uncle Podger putting up a picture" just after my father had finished reciting the grave scene from 'Hamlet' to a large company of my grown-up relations. Other things we loved were some scenes from Dickens that my father had memorised – David Copperfield's childhood, Mr Wopsle's performance of Hamlet, the Cratchits' Christmas dinner – some comic extracts from Thackeray and two dialect poems by the Dorset poet, William Barnes. Our literary taste as children must have corresponded very closely with that of the Mothers' Union, for these items were in constant demand at the social evenings of that body, organised by my mother. My father pretended to despise and be ashamed of his comic turns. In Nov. 1908 he writes in his diary: "Chrysanthemum Show, to which I only went vicariously [Cecil Day Lewis later wrote a poem about the Chrysanthemum Show]. Miss H. (his tutor in voice production) surprised me in the evening by saying that my comic efforts in some nonsense (Uncle Podger) by Jer. K. Jerome! Were very good, and I am to do more." In December he writes: "Miss H. was moderately pleased with version of Jerome's 'That telephone' (rot) and very flattering indeed to the Belial speech. The 2nd XV easily beat Kelly Coll. At Tavistock." My father, in fact, was an excellent raconteur and comic reciter: he had the unselfconsciousness typical of his generation.

I hope I have not suggested that my father's children were ever compelled from any misguided notion of cultural education to sit in silence from an early age and listen to poetry that was beyond their comprehension and experience. My father had grown-relatives and friends if he wanted an audience more numerous than that of his wife or more responsive than the cows of Dorsetshire or the mountain sheep of the Lakes. His children may often have disappointed him by their lack of literary taste, but he never tried to force the things he loved upon unwilling ears. And we did have the advantage of growing up in a household where great poetry was loved and lovingly recited, and unconsciously imbibed at an early age much that we might have missed. We also knew by the time we were 14 a great many of the 19th century English novels, and moved on terms of easy familiarity with their characters. Not only was the Christmas Carol read to us each Christmas, but every summer holiday and every Easter holidays my father would read to his assembled family a daily chapter of Scott or Dickens or Thackeray, Stevenson, George Eliot or Jane Austen. We must all have known intimately at least a dozen novels before we went to our public schools, and I think we believed all well-brought up boys and girls were even as we. For the seven Careys at Abbey House and the six Nowell Smiths at the School House, who were the only children of whom we knew or thought much, were brought up in the same tradition and had the same literary background. Probably we were inclined to literary snobbery: I remember an Oxford friend of mine coming to stay at Sherborne and the astonished silence which greeted his admission to my mother that he had never read 'Vanity Fair.' It was almost as if he had said that he had never been to church, and I felt vaguely ashamed for having introduced such a boor (he is now a Fellow of All Souls) into the bosom of my family.

It was mainly the works of the 19th century writers which were read to us aloud, but to my father who was born nearly 100 years ago, they were nearer than they seem to us. He had heard Dickens' public reading of his works, and had met Matthew Arnold at a garden party in the Lakes. He stood in the same relation to these mid-Victorians as the middle-aged among us do to Bridges, Rupert Brooke and Housman, or younger people in this company to T.S. Eliot and E.M. Forster. Of later authors he became a great admirer of Thomas Hardy who alone, I believe of 20th century poets qualified for admission to my father's collection of poems for recitation and whose novels were added to the list of those read aloud to his family. Of Shaw and Wells I believe he read little or nothing, and never became an admirer either of Swinburne or Bridges. But he had a short-lived enthusiasm for Galsworthy after reading 'the Forstye Saga' and even read a paper on this novel to the Duffers. But he soon tired of Galsworthy, whom he thought ineffective and deficient in

a philosophy of life for all his analytical skill. I think he found the modern 'problem novel' solemn and humourless and lacking in style: my father always disliked being preached at.

Nearly all that I have said so far has been concerned with my father as a middle-aged or elderly man, for it was as such that I knew him. And as I look back over his life, the years from 40 to 60 stand out as the best and fullest years of his life. My father as a young man and a bachelor is a person that I have only lately become acquainted with from reading the diaries which he kept, often very fully, from the age of 9. It sometimes appears as though he lived two lives, for having lived for 43 years as a bachelor he then crammed into the 16 years which separated his marriage and the outbreak of war in 1914 what most men spread out over their whole active life. In those years he not only founded the Duffers and married a wife, but also became a very enthusiastic and successful housemaster, published his first and only work (a school edition of Pindar), became the father of five children and adopted a new profession by studying for orders and becoming ordained at the age of 55. Nowadays most schoolmasters would feel that the undertaking of any one of these tasks was enough to excuse him from doing any of the others at the same time: but as you read the diaries of these years, there are still the same daily entries of the day's reading, and still in the manuscript books of poetry, the total of memorised lines mounts and mounts. Housemaster, form-master, husband, father, Secretary of the O.S. Society, priest, still he finds time nearly every day for long bicycle rides in the country, for daily readings of his favourite books, and for long, wise and witty letters to his sisters and his friends. For my father lived in the golden age of the professional classes. As I sit in my study writing these words, I realise how far we have moved from there in 30 years – rising, as I do, from my desk now to answer the front door, now to stoke the boiler in the kitchen, now to bring the pram in from the garden. My father lived in an age when the scholar knew nothing of the scullery and little of the nursery, and when housemasters were not expected to spend so much of their time writing letters or watching football. He saved time in other ways. The telephone was then nearly and the radio totally unknown. The cinema didn't come to Sherborne till about 1920, and I believe my father saw the inside of it only once. He could never be persuaded to repeat the experiment. He had never been known, in the days we knew him, to take part in a parlour game, except once when he came to visit me at Rugby and to his own and to our surprise competed brilliantly in a paper-and-pencil game. He also had no 'hobbies'. He had not the collector's urge, he was neither fisherman nor gardener, and had no interest in any sort of manual work or manual skill. No man less deserved the name of handyman. He pruned his life carefully and so left space in it for the development of those things which he chiefly loved – reading, mountains, and long bicycle rides in the country. He was thus partly lucky and partly wise. He lived his whole life, as we lived our childhood, in an age of abundant domestic labour and before the plague of over-organisation had invaded school and boarding house. But he also had the wisdom (or was it part of his nature?) to restrict his loyalties. His affections were given to one school, to a few poets and a few novelists, to a few parts of the country, a few close friends retained mostly from Clifton or Oxford days or his early years at Sherborne.

Have I given a picture of a very narrow existence and a narrow-minded type of man? Unambitious my father certainly was, and that perhaps is the reason why one with such great gifts as letter-writer, speech-maker, teacher, talker and raconteur never published anything in his life but a school edition of Pindar. But as I read the diaries of his early manhood and middle-age, I get the impression of a personality not narrow but singularly rounded and mature, of a judgment very shrewd and sane. And that was the impression he gave to his friends. King in many ways was eccentric, but he was in the best sense a man of the world.

What sort of child was father to this man? Let us look at him in Clifton as a boy of 14 – "in the afternoon I studied one of Macaulay's essays but it was too deep for me. So I put it down pretty soon. However, I read Mr Robert Montgomery's poems." Later in the year he returned to Macaulay, and reading his essay on Madame d'Arblay recorded in his diary that it was "very jolly indeed." 3rd Feb.: "I went with Heath, Algie and others of smaller note brook-jumping. This was awful fun and in passing through a village (Westbury) we got some ginger beer at the general shop which was still jollier." In the same month he described 50 lines of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as "very jolly," and there is an interesting entry under Feb. 16th: "read a paper about velocipedes in a boy's magazine which made me wish to have one very much." It was 25 years before he did become an owner of one, and by that time they had changed their name to bicycle.

Will you excuse me if I read a few more entries from the diary of this same year, the year 1870, when my father reached the age of 15: "The term in the Upper 4th was most wretched. In the first place I had just begun to see the beauty of Greek and the row in the room quite but a stop to my attempts to study." This boy, you may say is a prig: but you would be wrong, I believe. On June 28th he enters: "Today has been most disastrous for the college in cricket, for the 2nd XI of the Clifton Club easily licked us and thanks to a cheating umpire who gave out 4 fellows who were not out we were also slightly beaten at Sherborne." A year later he records on May 24th: "I find my form work interesting. Bathed in the afternoon and read an act of Hamlet in the evening. The Derby day – I won 3/-." His attitude to games, references to which in his own children's letters from school were unfavourably criticised by him in later life, fluctuated considerably. In Aug. 1871, he wrote: "I tried to get the other fellows to come somewhere for the waterfalls but forsooth! There was a cricket match they wanted to watch." But in the following October he wrote: "if I can not play football it is no use coming to Clifton." In May 1874 there is a long and detailed account of a cricket match between Clifton and the Liverpool Cricket Club.

He was then 18 and already forming his taste for the authors that remained his favourites throughout life. It is clear that poetry at that time filled a large part of his time and of his thoughts, though other things had their rightful place. "I have read 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'Twelfth Night', almost more pleased with the latter from expecting less. No work at all. Little exercise and many unripe apples, so I go home rather the worse. A party at my uncle's in the evening. John and a friend of his monopolised (by previous contract) the most attractive guests, the two Miss Scotts, the elder of whom I subsequently found very jolly and lively – and the younger very pretty and lively too."

His diary for this period is full of references to Shelley, whom he admired exceedingly at this age but afterwards dropped, and he was already reading widely in Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth. On his way back to school in 1873 he writes: "I wish now I had given up all thoughts of work and gone in for absolute mental idleness except as regards reading Wordsworth. The last Sunday I finished the last book of 'the Excursion', having now read it all through once, at least half twice and a quarter 30 times. He is indeed a wonderful poet and why should I be ashamed to say gives me much more pleasure than Milton, to whom my great objection is that what he says, often does not seem to come from genuine inspiration, while other parts of course are quiet beyond Wordsworth." A year later he was nearly 19 and still reading Wordsworth but with less enthusiasm. "Of the Prelude I have read 9 books. To any but a Wordsworthian as far as I can guess *videtur tardius esse*: it drags very much upon me sometimes. I have read today Thackeray's Bk. Of Snobs and think it excellent."

My father left Clifton shortly after his 20th birthday and started on his four years at Oxford. His diaries of this period are full of comments on his reading, more often on his reading of his favourite English authors than on the books which he was expected by his tutors to read. "Much reading but little work" is a constant refrain. "I finished 'Romola'," he writes, "and now bow reverently before George Eliot and place her among the gods to be worshipped through thick and thin." "I have been reading Lewis' Goethe. I resolved in the summer first and several times since to renounce such books for the time as destructive to Mods. Work but that seems almost *propter vitam vivendi perdere causas*." "I find it utterly impossible to read a novel or a play except at a sitting." I finished 'Atlanta in Calydon' but I don't think I shall trouble Swinburne again." He never did. George Eliot he never ceased to admire, but other gods were later placed on higher pedestals.

Throughout his time at Oxford there was this conflict between inclination and duty in his reading. In his second year he wrote: "I get on very well with transcendentalism, lazy poetry and the like, but not with logic: and this augurs ill for a lawyer." In the middle of his penultimate term, when he was 23 and about to take Greats at Oxford he returns in his diary to the same subject: "Though I cannot say that divine philosophy is to me as musical as Apollo's lute (except perhaps the Plato) yet it is far the best part of Greats work and I hope not to give it up after the ordeal is past. Already I feel much useless remorse at having played the dilettante in reading – of course if I had methodically gone in for searching out the best that has been said and done in the world, I would not have cared for my degree and this is what I would choose to have done even now. The worse of such work is that with an irresolute person it must be dilettantism, and

has been so with me. It seems to me that Herodotus as got up for Greats involves great labour and is nearly useless – so too Cicero's letters are not worth the toil of mastery. The Republic is sublime – perhaps the Ethics. I don't know enough to say this. Thucydides is good and the logic most valuable; and I have cared for none of these things, but have dabbled in pictures, gone enthusiastically many times over the Lake District, read Shakespeare and Matthew Arnold. This is a statement of my career here at the eleventh hour." There follows a statement of work done – "This week 42 hours – average 7 hours. Poor."

I was asked to address you on the subject of the influence of literature in my father's life, and I have left you with the conclusion that the influence of his love of literature upon my father was to make him neglect his studies at Oxford, and in fact obtain a very much worse degree than a man of his great abilities ought to have obtained. Do you remember Johnson's words? "Idleness is a disease which must be combated; but I would not advise a rigid adherence to a particular plan of study. I myself have never persisted in any plan for two days together; A man ought to read just as inclination leads him; for what he reads as a task will do him little good." I am here on dangerous ground, and do not wish to adopt the role of devil's advocate. But Dr Johnson has brought us to the heart of the matter – "what a man reads as a task will do him little good." My father was influenced by what he read because he read it from inclination and not as a task. The object of reading the classics is not to get a good degree but to enlarge one's mind and experience and deepen one's appreciation of life and its possibilities. The object of being educated is not to pass exams but to be an educated man. My father could certainly have got a better degree had he spent his time at Oxford differently, and no doubt, as he himself admitted, he could have got a better degree and still read widely in the authors he loved. But he would not on that account have been a better man or a better schoolmaster. What made him a great schoolmaster was his deep and disinterested love for the things he loved. There is a passage in C.S. Lewis' 'Screw-tape Letters' where the devil says to his pupil: "The man who truly and disinterestedly enjoys any one thing in the world, for its own sake, and without caring two pence what other people say about it, is by that very fact forearmed against some of our subtlest modes of attack. You should always try to make the patient abandon the people or food or books he really likes in favour of the "best" people, the "right" food, the "important" books." My father was by ordinary standards a well-read man, but he was deeply read rather than widely read: and he never read a book in order to be a well-read man or in order to be able to talk about it or in order not to be thought old-fashioned, or for any other reason than that he enjoyed reading it. When he read Wordsworth's 'Excursion' as a boy at school, he did not read it through once, read a book about it, think out some impressive comment on it, and then say: "There now, I've done the Excursion; let's go on to the Prelude." No: he read "all of it once, at least half twice and a quarter 30 times." That is why he infected generations of Shirburnians with his own enthusiasm, and that is why he is being remembered here this afternoon.

I wish my father were here to criticise his third son's first effort at a paper to the Duffers. The criticism would be a kindly one, for he was not an impartial father; but I have been conscious all through the reading of this paper of my own shortcomings when judged by his performance.

I should like to end where I began, by thanking your chairman for his invitation, Mr Randolph for the hospitality of this very familiar garden, and all of you for your kind attention. I always welcome an excuse for returning to Sherborne. As one travels west from Salisbury, after about ten miles the countryside takes on a new charm and radiance, and when I alight at Sherborne station, I never find it difficult to understand why my father who belonged to the north and wanted once to live his life there, was compelled by an overmastering affection to spend his days in Dorsetshire.

FRANCIS WILLIAM KING (1907-1981).
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