

Guess Who's Coming to Breakfast

In the years leading to the outbreak of the First World War and then spanning the next 23 post-war years, an apartment at No 5 Raymond Buildings, Gray's Inn – remarkable for its fine paintings – lay at the centre of a network of emerging poets and other artists. This was the home, until bombed in 1941, of the polymath and senior Civil Servant, Edward (Eddie) Marsh (knighted in 1937), who in 1905 became Private Secretary to Winston Churchill when the latter was made Under-Secretary for the Colonies.

Whenever in office in the years that followed, Churchill always ensured that Eddie served with him at every department he headed. Even during Churchill's 'wilderness' years, Marsh remained in contact with his old chief, often working as unpaid copy editor on Churchill's histories and other writings.

The importance of Marsh as the patron of artists, however, ranks even higher than his distinguished career as a public servant. His patronage was of the utmost value because he had access to many friends in the fields of politics, art and literature, regularly spending weekends amongst them at grand country house parties. Above all, he had money – always useful to young impoverished artists.

The ever sociable Eddie was also an entertaining host, usually over breakfast at No 5, cooked by his loyal housekeeper Mrs Elgy, 'an apple-faced woman from Derbyshire'. Breakfast guests might include Rupert Brooke, Stanley Spencer, Siegfried Sassoon, Edward Thomas, Paul Nash and W.H. Davies. To this list ought to be added the name of Lady Eileen Wellesley, daughter of the Duke of Wellington and Rupert Brooke's lover, whose hair pins were found in Brooke's bed at No 5 by a shocked Mrs Elgy.

Breakfast gatherings suited Eddie Marsh's life style very well, as on most evenings he was committed to dining with friends at their homes or in the West End, or visiting the theatre or ballet. There were, of course, some suppers at No 5, the best remembered being the party given for Brooke in June 1914 on his return from travelling in America and the South Seas. Guests included Harley Granville-Barker, Duff Cooper, Hugh Walpole, Basil Dean and Cathleen Nesbitt. Those who felt they had not outstayed their welcome were in the Walks at dawn

watching Brooke perform an Hawaiian siva-siva dance under the plane trees of Gray's Inn. The diehards even stayed on for breakfast.

Marsh benefited from a bequest that had come to him through his family and which had a fascinating origin. In 1812, the Prime Minister, Spencer Perceval, had been assassinated by a deranged bankrupt in the lobby of the House of Commons. Following Perceval's death, his descendants, of whom Marsh was in time to be one as a great-grandson, were awarded a government annuity by shocked Members of Parliament. This annuity (and a legacy from an aunt) was used by Marsh to help struggling artists, always a major preoccupation with him much to the disgust of Rupert Brooke, a close friend to whom he was practically a father figure and later literary executor. Marsh called the bequest his 'murder money'.

The year 1913 proved particularly fortunate for the poet Siegfried Sassoon and the painter and poet Isaac Rosenberg because both were then introduced to Marsh and subsequently visited him at Raymond Buildings. In Sassoon's case, the introduction was made through the poet and critic Edmund Gosse, who suggested that Sassoon ought to send some of his poetry to Marsh, himself a noted critic. Sassoon did so, and Marsh responded flatteringly: 'I think you have ... no end of beautiful tunes in your head.'

In May 1914, Sassoon at last broke free from his family home in Kent and moved to live at No 1 Raymond Buildings, which if nothing else was close to Marsh. Sassoon engaged a housekeeper, Mrs Fretter, who appeared 'economic' or so he told Marsh. At this time Raymond Buildings was regarded as at the 'noisy end of Gray's Inn', being too close to the interminable traffic on the Theobalds Road. Sassoon was not so much disturbed by that as by his inability to make ends meet despite the estimable Mrs Fretter. He was never very domesticated and, aged 27, had lived a very sheltered life at home, writing poetry, playing cricket and golf, and going fox-hunting.

He had overspent furnishing No 1, and rather than concentrating on writing and improving his prospects, he purchased a rolled up umbrella and bowler hat, and from the top deck of a bus became a tourist and generally a man-about-town. It proved disastrous, and soon he was back living with his mother, but not before he met Rupert Brooke. This was over bacon and kidneys at a breakfast meeting at No 5, which from 1909 was Brooke's unofficial London home, encouraged by the ever indulgent Marsh. (Mrs Elgy, however, disliked Brooke's preference

for eating meals on a tray whilst sprawled on the sitting-room floor propped up by cushions.)

The meeting with Brooke was not a success, as Sassoon felt inadequate in the presence of the more worldly and 'metaphysically clever' poet with whom he was left alone after Marsh went to work. Sassoon wrote: 'When bidding me goodbye [Brooke's] demeanour implied that as far as he was concerned there was no apparent reason why we should ever meet again.' They never did. The impending war was to be the making of Sassoon, both as a man (twice decorated for gallantry) and as a poet. In 1929 he was to win the Hawthornden Prize, not for poetry, but for his famous prose work *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*. Never knowingly marginalised, Eddie Marsh was Chairman of the Prize Committee.

Isaac Rosenberg had met Marsh in November 1913 at the Café Royal and after a few more meetings he was invited back to Marsh's flat in Gray's Inn. Rosenberg found the experience somewhat overpowering. As his biographer Jean Moorcroft Wilson tells us, not only was the flat far more elegant than was comfortable for him, but 'almost every wall was covered with Marsh's extensive collection of 18th and 19th century pictures which he had been invited to see'. If Rosenberg had ventured into the bathroom he would have found similar pictorial evidence there, too. Rosenberg showed his host some of his poetry, and Marsh made some helpful criticism. Later he purchased at least two of Rosenberg's paintings, one of which, 'Sacred Love', was hung in his guest room at Raymond Buildings.

During 1915, Marsh was working long hours at the Admiralty, sometimes until after midnight as a major crisis threatened in the Dardenelles. He was grieving too for Rupert Brooke who had recently died on his way to the Gallipoli landings. And yet he had time to send money to a cash-strapped Rosenberg who received the cheque with a marked lack of gratitude, commenting 'it will do for paints'. Another gift of money followed, and this time was more generously acknowledged. Rosenberg was killed in action by a German dawn raiding party on the Arras-St Quentin Front on 1st April 1918, having written a final letter to Marsh four days before his death. His body was never identified.

Recently Marsh has returned to public consciousness because he figures in passages on Churchill in a book by Michael Bloch, thus providing a timely excuse for revisiting life at Raymond Buildings during Eddie Marsh's time, which Master Machin celebrated in *Graya No 95* more than 30 years ago.



*Sir Edward Marsh in his flat at Gray's Inn,
by kind permission of the National Portrait Gallery.*

Bloch characterises Churchill as a 'sybarite' and 'misogynist', who was not only smitten by 'the good-looking' Marsh but by others including Rupert Brooke. According to Bloch, Marsh was 'a minor official' whom Churchill had met only once at a party before appointing him as his Private Secretary, causing many eyebrows to be raised at the time. Marsh is damned as effeminate with a high-pitched voice (due to a childhood attack of mumps and measles, not referred to by Bloch), who enjoyed removing the boots of young huntsmen.

Whatever the truth of this or whether it matters, not a whit of it should detract from Eddie Marsh's classical scholarship as translator of Horace and La Fontaine and his contributions to English letters, not least as the editor of five volumes of Georgian poetry and Churchill's literary output. Nor should it overshadow his work to further the careers of Brooke, Sassoon and Rosenberg – and also Ivor Novello, Mark Gertler, Duncan Grant, Katherine Mansfield and even D.H. Lawrence. To all of these and many more Marsh was a friend indeed.

The nation too has benefited: many of the paintings once belonging to Marsh are now at Tate Britain and Marsh was responsible for persuading a reluctant Rupert Brooke to adopt the title 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester' for a poem, later famous, that Brooke originally wanted to call 'Sentimental Exile'. Thus a literary calamity was avoided.

Master Timothy Shuttleworth

