

They Lived in Gray's Inn – E.H.W. Meyerstein



Does anyone today remember E.H.W. Meyerstein or read his books? Few perhaps, yet when he died on 12th September 1952 the BBC thought him important enough to mention his death on the one o'clock news. I noted the fact because he was a friend of a friend of mine and I had read some of his poems. Perhaps the only one of his many books likely to be consulted today is his *A Life of Thomas Chatterton*, published in 1930.

From 1913 until his death he lived in 3 Gray's Inn Place with a gap caused by a bomb in 1941, which brought down the ceilings, causing him to move to Oxford until 1946. His name was painted up prominently and I always noticed it when I was a student of the Inn all those years

ago and passed his doorway often. I wish I had been able to go in, as his collection of pictures included works by Guercino, Degas, Thomas Otway, Etty, a little Gainsborough sketch and a landscape by Richard Wilson, while a Beethoven manuscript hung above the piano.

He was born on 11th August 1884 in South Hampstead, son of Sir Edward Meyerstein, who had sold his family merchant business to become a stockbroker, and evidently a very prosperous one, as he gave great sums to charity including over £85,000 to the Middlesex Hospital. However at the beginning of his autobiography, *Of My Early Life (1889-1918)* (published posthumously in 1957, edited by Rowland Watson), he wrote: 'I suspect – but you mustn't tell anybody – that I was born out of Jane Austen by Apuleius.'

Although both his parents were Jewish, they were non-practising; he was brought up a Protestant Christian, was confirmed and worshiped all his life as an Anglican. In 1912 the family moved to Chevening in Kent, and his father served two terms as High Sheriff of the county being knighted at the end of his first term in 1938. One of his uncles, Moritz Meyerstein, invented the spectrometer.

After two tutors (one of whom happily introduced him to Shelley) and prep school at Eastbourne, he was sent to Harrow. His housemaster was Sir Arthur Hort, a classical scholar whom he described as ‘a tall, brown-bearded man with a Venetian senator’s appearance and a taste for gardening’. He began writing poetry, mostly in Latin, and in his second term was promoted to the Lower Fifth, moving to E.W. Howson’s house. He rose to fifth in the school and became a monitor but he was teased by having his pictures reversed and ‘JEW’ written on the back and having his revolving bookcase turned round so violently that all the books flew out. He was a good musician, particularly liking Beethoven and Mendelssohn, and music remained an abiding passion for the rest of his life, inspiring many of his poems.

In the holidays he went with his family to Cornwall where he met the novelist and art critic Charles Marriott. There he wrote poems, some of which were published in *The Cornishman*, and one was set to music by Arthur Bliss. Although unhappy at school he prospered academically, becoming a personal pupil of the headmaster, the Rev Dr Joseph Wood, who continued his tuition during two holidays at Aldeburgh where Meyerstein’s parents had hired a house near his. After two shots at a Balliol scholarship he came top of the scholarship candidates for New College, Magdalen and Corpus Christi. He chose Magdalen and went up as a demy.

His own words sum up what Oxford did for him: ‘Looking back, I think I can say that the effect on my nature was largely climatic. The seeds of Platonism had been sewn already, also those of an aptitude for Latin, while the dominating inner influence, that (roughly speaking) of Beethoven’s later works, which has coloured my outlook on life more than any human being was, if not paramount, certainly in action during the public-school period. The enervating atmosphere of the then unindustrialized place of learning encouraged a certain vacillation in me, true, and may have helped to postpone the revelation of my mother’s hold on me for some years, but with two exceptions ... I was happiest with the schoolmaster type of don. The Latin tuition received

from Christopher Cookson is a possession for ever, apart from its practical results, a first in Honour Moderations and a mention in the Hertford Scholarship. It can be summarized as a determination always to get down to the meaning of an author, to worry at it like a dog with a bone.'

He published his first book *The Door*, poems in the *Oxford Magazine* and had two in the first volume of *Oxford Poetry*. He wrote that he had been happier in Oxford during his first term than he had ever been at any time. While an undergraduate he continued his musical interests, particularly Beethoven. Mendelssohn at that time was 'out' and Adrian Boulton, then an undergraduate friend at Christ Church, when told of his interest, said: 'How bold of you!' But although the teaching at Magdalen had been excellent for Honour Moderations, it was not so for Greats and when the list was published he found he had been given a second after a two-hour viva. He was not awarded a fellowship at his college and had to look for another career.

He chose to sit the Civil Service examination as he wanted to work for the British Museum. He had French lessons at Oxford followed by a month with a German tutor at home, then his father sent him off to Germany for more lessons, which he described as a ghastly experience, but he worked hard, passed his examination and was offered a job in the Manuscript Department. The most interesting work he did there was cataloguing Bishop Berkeley's papers.

Then came war. On 28th October 1914, walking to the British Museum, he passed Holborn Hall and on an impulse went in and enlisted in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, choosing that regiment because a close friend had Irish blood on his mother's side and he thought he might be sent to Dublin. In fact he was sent to Cork, taking with him Berlioz's *Memoires* and a pocket Sophocles, to begin an inglorious military career. On 19th December he was discharged as 'not likely to become an efficient soldier'. On Armistice Day he resigned from the museum and thereafter lived on his literary earnings supplemented by a small allowance.

He was touchy to a degree, hating his parents and his home, though it is hard to see they did anything to deserve it, and he did not refuse an allowance. Yet, as the editor of his autobiography put it, 'Paradoxically enough, to the end of his life he never ceased to lament that he was an orphan without a home'. From his attitude to life it might be thought he was an only child but he was not. He had a younger sister Phyllis who was beautiful and an artist. The editor of his autobiography wrote:

'Brother and sister were devoted to each other when they were young, but later, jealousy took root and she became another victim of his lash.' Nevertheless her two daughters were his friends at the end of his life.

Living alone, and going his own tortured way, by the end of his life he had become distinctly 'bohemian'. He was described as a heavy, burly, bulky man, some six foot tall with a shambling gait and jerky unconscious gestures as if talking to an unseen Satanic interlocutor. One clear brown eye was alert and frank but the other squinted as a result of Bell's palsy which distorted the right side of his face. Although he bought good clothes he never looked after them and became distinctly shabby. My friend, mentioned earlier, was serving in the RAF during the war and took Meyerstein to dine in the officers' mess. Afterwards his commanding officer took him aside and said it must never happen again.

Meyerstein published 15 books of poetry, five novels, two plays and two biographies.

Master Julian Jeffs

