

**OXFORD AND POETRY IN 1911:
AN INAUGURAL LECTURE
DELIVERED IN THE SHELDONIAN
THEATRE ON JUNE 2, 1911**

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Oxford and Poetry in 1911: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered in the Sheldonian Theatre on June 2, 1911 by T. Herbert Warren

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T. HERBERT WARREN

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AN INAUGURAL LECTURE
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ON JUNE 2, 1911

BY

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HENRY FROWDE, M.A.
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TO THE
UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA

OXFORD AND POETRY IN 1911

Allora è buono ragionare lo bene quando ello è ascoltato.

DANTE, *Convivio*, iv. 27.

MR. VICE-CHANCELLOR,

To be given the right, and therefore the duty, to speak in this place, and from this Chair; to speak for Oxford and on the high theme of Poetry, is indeed to be accorded a position which might well overweight even the most competent and confident.

Only to aspire to be Professor of Poetry is, as an old friend said to me a short time ago, an honour.

Oxford has given me many honours. Some here may remember the 'smooth-tongued scholar' in Marlowe, who says

I fetch from Oxford, not from heraldry,
my gentry

Without adopting these words in their literal sense, I would say assuredly that Oxford has given me all the best honours I have, and those I would most care to have.

To strive to serve her is my privilege. May her own inspiration aid me and the traditions of this Chair! The traditions of this Chair. What are they? It has many, some old, some new.

There is one, a lost tradition, which I have been asked to revive, and to address you in Latin, to shroud, shall I say? my deficiencies in the 'decent obscurity of a learned language'.

And for certain reasons I might feel tempted to revive

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ALBION

Traditions of the Chair
Latin or English? 'Not to be a Poet'

it. There are some things which can be said so much more neatly and easily, without fulsome ness or flattery, in Latin than in English. But I doubt if to-day the suggestion is a practical one. Whatever may have been the feeling in Keble's own time, I think it has been admitted since that the fact of his lectures being in Latin has prevented their finding that vogue which they deserved, or producing that effect which they might well have produced.¹ Keble himself, in criticizing Copleston's lectures, condemned the practice and in strong terms. 'A dead language,' he said, 'is almost a gag to the tongue in delivering ideas at once so abstract and so delicately distinguished.' He afterwards returned to Latin himself on the ground that it would make him more careful in pronouncing judgement. I do not think, after reading his lectures, that he of all men needed that added terror, and I hope I may not.

Another tradition of the Chair I know not if I have broken. I should like in some small measure to have done so, and you will sympathize when I tell you what it is. I will give it you in the words of a poetess to a poet, of Elizabeth Barrett to Robert Browning. In one of those delightful early letters, she writes under the date of January, 1848. 'You of the "Crown" and of the "Lyre" to seek influence from the "Chair of Casiopeia"! I hope she will forgive me for using her name thus. I might as well have compared her (as a Chair, I suppose) to a Professorship of Poetry in the University of Oxford according to the last election. You know the qualification there is *not to be a poet.*'

But to come to traditions of the Chair more recent and more living. I think naturally first, as you will be

¹ See p. 36.

*Mackail; Bradley; Courthope; Palgrave; 5
Shairp; Doyle*

thinking, of him who filled it last. I take to-day 'this laurel',—the phrase is now so trite we hardly give due credit to the admirable poet who coined it for us some sixty years ago,—from the brow of one who uttered not only 'nothing base', but nothing that had not, to my mind at any rate, in his utterance of it, an indescribable grace. *Ipsa mollities*, a certain 'Dorique delicacy', such as the scholarly old diplomat and Provost of Eton who has recently been made to live again for us so fully, Sir Henry Wotton, found in the youthful Milton—these phrases seem to me to describe more aptly than any others the utterance of Professor Mackail. His criticism of poetry was in itself a kind of poetry.

Nor can I forget, who could forget? the recent tenure of another, a friend from my undergraduate time, and of the same Society, Professor Bradley, who in his five years surely made an enduring mark, who reconciled that ancient, ever recurrent, but ever reconcilable feud of two great forces of the soul and departments of the mind, and showed us how philosophy can handle poetry.

I think, too, as my mind turns backward, of the author of that delightful 'play of the youthful spirit', the 'Paradise of Birds', who in later years, amid the routine of office conscientiously discharged, accomplished that vast task which Pope projected, with which Gray dallied, which Warton left half told, and has given us a definitive *History of English Poetry*.

The Editor of that *Golden Treasury* which was so much for my generation I knew and have heard, and I have heard too the serious and gravely generous author of the 'Bush aboon Traquair'.

The author, gallant and urbane, of the 'Private of the

6 *Arnold and 'the Oxford Movement'*

Bufs' I never heard, but some here have doubtless done so.

And some few have even greater memories. When we think of this Chair and its tradition in the last century, two names stand out before all others, those of Matthew Arnold and of Keble. To the superficial observer they seem to stand out in sharp contrast.

They seem as far apart as the grave and the gay, the sacred and the secular, the saint and the Voltairian. In truth Arnold was no mere Voltairian. Keble again was no stiff or bigoted divine, no believer 'because it was impossible'.

It is not sufficiently remembered that Keble was the old college friend of Dr. Arnold and that he was Matthew Arnold's own godfather. It was not only Clough of whom it could be said—

The voice that from St. Mary's thrilled the hour,
He could not choose but let it in though loth.

Matthew Arnold, as an undergraduate, fell like Stanley, like Froude and Pattison and Jowett, like Coleridge and Temple,—who indeed of that time did not fall?—under the influence of the Tractarians. Many here will remember Arnold's moving description of Newman at St. Mary's, given in the Lecture on Emerson delivered in America, beginning, 'Forty years ago when I was an undergraduate at Oxford voices were in the air then which haunt my memory still. Happy the man who in that susceptible season of youth hears such voices! They are a possession to him for ever.'

And the debt was not only spiritual or moral, it was aesthetic also. They had as a common possession a deep love and reverence for Wordsworth, and it is worth while to compare Keble's studied yet happy dedication of his Lectures, with Arnold's Memorial Verses on

Wordsworth. Attention has often been called to the somewhat surprising title prefixed by Keble to these same Lectures, *De Poeticae Vi Medica*. Is it fanciful to suggest that Arnold's well-known expression about Wordsworth's 'healing power' is borrowed from this heading?

But I have said enough and more than enough for the present moment on these two great names. They are not the only great names of the last century. Keble was preceded by a name not quite so memorable in the history of the Church or of sacred poetry, but still memorable in regard to these interests, and in relation to Church History and sacred scholarship certainly of first-rate eminence, that of Dean Milman.

And there is yet one more name belonging to the century which ought not to be forgotten, that with which it opens. Two of the three I have mentioned are Oriel names. So pre-eminently is this other name, that of Edward Copleston. There are few to which Oriel or Oxford owes more.

The Chair has been in existence for just two hundred years, and its history falls exactly within the bounds of two delimited centuries, the eighteenth and the nineteenth. I have mentioned, omitting living persons, four names of special note in the nineteenth century. Oddly enough the eighteenth presents exactly the same number, those of the first Professor, Joseph Trapp, of Joseph Spence, of Robert Lowth, and Thomas Warton.

Trapp was of Wadham. There is another debt to that most poetical College, which has, I think, never been properly recognized or put on record. The Chair owes its first tradition to one Wadham man, it owes its very existence to-day to another, a recent Head of that House, Mr. G. E. Thorley.