

Addenda to Maurice Bowra's *New Bats in Old Belfries*

HENRY HARDY

WHEN Maurice Bowra's scabrous verse satires on his contemporaries were published in 2005,¹ two of them had to be omitted from the book² because their subject, Patrick Leigh Fermor, was still alive, and unwilling to give his approval for their inclusion during his lifetime.³ These two poems, which follow this note, were published separately after Leigh Fermor's death in more than one place – most recently, and with some discussion of the principles underlying publication of Bowra's parodies, in 2012 with my 'Printing the Unprintable', which is also reproduced below.⁴

'The Holy Child' was discovered in 2018 by Kevin J. Gardner, Professor of English at Baylor University, Texas, in the course of editing John Betjeman's *Harvest Bells: New and Uncollected Poems*, 2019. It (if it is one poem) is written in Bowra's hand on three successive pages of a notebook that belonged to John Betjeman.⁵ It is evidently in draft form, lacking the polish characteristic of the poems in the main manuscript. Each of the three metrically distinct sections or poems (not numbered in the manuscript) appears on a separate page. The date 1955 appears elsewhere in the notebook, and may be a clue to when Bowra wrote the verses down, if not to the date of (possibly earlier) composition. Thanks are due to Kevin Gardner for kindly bringing his discovery to my attention.

¹ Maurice Bowra, *New Bats in Old Belfries, or Some Loose Tiles*, ed. Henry Hardy and Jennifer Holmes, 2005.

² On pp. 99–101 and 104–5, where spaces of the right size were left for later use.

³ A name was also omitted from one of the poems, 'Russian Cradle-Song', for the same reason. See p. 166.

⁴ The poems were first published in my 'Maurice Bowra on Patrick Leigh Fermor', *Wadham College Gazette*, 2011, 106–12, at 107–9, and 'On the Coast of Terra Fermoor' appeared soon afterwards, with an adapted version of my Wadham headnote, in the *Spectator*, 7 December 2011, 76–7. Both poems have also been reproduced on the website of the Patrick Leigh Fermor Society, [here](#) and [here](#), attracting much critical comment.

⁵ Notebook 29, John Betjeman fonds, McPherson Library Special Collections, University of Victoria, Canada.

All three extra poems were to be included in a new and enlarged paperback edition of Bowra's poems, to be published by Cecil Woolf. However, Woolf died on 10 June 2019, aged ninety-two, and his plans for a paperback died with him. But the typesetting for the new edition had been done, and the new material follows this introductory note. I should be delighted if any publisher wished to take the book on and bring Cecil Woolf's plan to fruition.

For help with 'Old Croaker', offered in connection with a competition run by *The Times Literary Supplement* in its issue of 16 September 2005, thanks are due to Alan Black, Eileen Cottis and Frances Dann, John Fuller, John and Patsy Paine, and Phil Rees. The poem was printed in that issue, together with an invitation to readers to identify as many of the the literary sources as they could. A prize was also offered, won by the team of Eileen Cottis and Frances Dann, with Alan Black as runner-up: see issue of 4 November 2005, 31. Letters about the poems are in the issues of 7 and 14 October 2005. Additional notes to 'Old Croaker' (including those arising from the competition), together with additions and corrections to other poems, are listed [here](#).

HENRY HARDY

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The Wounded Gigolo

O Balasha Cantacuzène,¹
Hear the war-cry of the Gael!²
In his last fierce fight he's losin';
He will fight, but he will fail.
Cruelly his lady spurned him,
Struck him when he asked for more,
Flung him down the stairs and turned him
Bag and baggage from the door.
Oh unhappy gigolo
Told to pack his traps and go;
He may mope and he may mow,
Echo only answers 'No'.

Hasten, every loyal Cretan,
To your wounded master's aid;
He will not admit he's beaten
While there's money to be made.
Stalwart heroes stand beside him,
Captain Moss³ and Major Xan,⁴

§ In this update of the folk-song 'Oh, no John', Bowra's target is Patrick ('Paddy') Leigh Fermor (1915–2011), writer, traveller, and Cretan war hero as a result of his activities while serving in the Special Operations Executive (SOE) during the Second World War.

¹ Balasha Cantacuzène (1899–1976), a Romanian painter from an aristocratic family. Leigh Fermor lived with her for some years in the late 1930s, first in the Peloponnese, then at her family's estate, Baleni, in northern Romania. They parted on the outbreak of war when Leigh Fermor returned to England to enlist, and did not meet again until 1965.

² Leigh Fermor was of partly Irish descent.

³ Ivan William Stanley ('Billy') Moss (1921–65), Leigh Fermor's second-in-command during their audacious kidnap of the German general commanding Crete in 1944.

⁴ Xan Fielding (95/1), an SOE colleague of Leigh Fermor's also working alongside the Cretan resistance movement during the Second World War.

Knowing that, whate'er betide him,
He is still their perfect man.
 Oh the hero gigolo,
 Bleeding from a mortal blow,
 He's been cut off from the dough,
 And he murmurs 'Woe, woe, woe!'

What avail him now the dances
Which he led on Ida's¹ peak?
No more like a ram he prances;
Gone the bums he used to tweak.
Let him pick and scratch his scrotum,
Wave his cock and shake his balls –
She will never turn to note 'em,
Never listen to his calls.
 Oh the jigging gigolo,
 Plying his fantastic toe –
 Like a wounded buffalo,
 He can only belch and blow.

What avails the apt quotation,
What the knowledge of the arts,
What the lore of every nation
Learned from many unpaid tarts?
Ah, his mistress will not listen,
Floating vaguely to the moon;
Vainly do his molars glisten
When he tries to break her swoon.
 Oh the learned gigolo,
 What was there he didn't know?
 Now there's nothing left to show
 To the girl he dazzled so.

¹ Mount Ida, the highest mountain in Crete; according to legend, the birth-place of Zeus. The kidnappers and their prize (see ooo above) followed a route across the mountain's summit.

Yet remains his greatest glory,
His proud prowess in the bed.
Never tool renowned in story
Had so fine a lustihead.
Can he not be up and at her?
Strike the target? Ring the bell?
Ah, to her it doesn't matter;
Nothing can restore the spell.
 Oh the potent gigolo,
 He could make the semen flow!
 Though the cock may crow and crow,
 He must pack his traps and go.

17 April 1950

On the Coast of Terra Fermoor

On the coast of Terra Fermoor, when the wind is on the lea,
And the paddy-fields are sprouting round a morning cup of tea,
Sits a lovely girl¹ a-dreaming, and she never thinks of me.

No, she never thinks of me
At her morning cup of tea,
Lovely girl with moon-struck eyes,
Juno fallen from the skies,
At the paddy-fields she looks
Musing on Tibetan books,

On the coast of Terra Fermoor high above the Cretan Sea.

Melting rainbows dance around her – what a tale she has to tell,
How Carmichael,² the Archangel, caught her in the asphodel,
And coquetting choirs of Cherubs loudly sang the first Joel,³

Loudly sang the first Joel
To their Blessed Damozel.⁴
Ah, she's doomed to wane and wilt
Underneath her load of guilt;

§ Kipling's 'Mandalay' (1892) and Edward Lear's 'The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo' (1877) are the literary models for this romance about the woman who, in Noel Annan's view, was perhaps Bowra's greatest love (*Celebration*, 74).

¹ Joan Eyres Monsell (1912–2003), daughter of the 1st Viscount Monsell, photographer. Bowra described her as his 'beautiful friend' (*Memories*, 286) and Alan Pryce-Jones (57/3), her former fiancé, recalled her as 'very fair, with huge myopic blue eyes' (*The Bonus of Laughter*, 1987, 82). Cyril Connolly, another admirer, attributed to the fictional Jane Sotheran (in his unpublished story 'Happy Deathbeds') Joan's alluring physical qualities, including 'enormous eyes of clouded violet-blue': Jeremy Lewis, *Cyril Connolly: A Life*, 1997, 418. An edited version of 'Happy Deathbeds' has since been published, in *The Selected Works of Cyril Connolly*, ed. Matthew Connolly, 2002, vol. 2, *The Two Natures*; but this passage is omitted there.

² Members of the Cretan Resistance used 'Kyr Michali' ('Mr Michael') as a code-name for Patrick Leigh Fermor (99/\$), who later became Joan Eyres Monsell's second husband.

³ Perhaps a fusion of Joan and Nowell.

⁴ As in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's eponymous poem.

She will never, never say
What the Cherubs sang that day,
When the Wise Men came to greet her and a star from heaven
fell.

Ah, her memory is troubled by a stirring of dead bones,
Bodies that a poisoned poppy¹ froze into a heap of stones;
When the midnight voices call her, how she mews and mopes
and moans.

Oh the stirring of the bones
And their rumble-tumble tones,
How they rattle in her ears
Over the exhausted years;
Lovely bones she used to know
Where the tall pink pansies blow
And her heart is sad because she never saw the risen Jones.

Cruel gods will tease and taunt her: she must always ask for
more,
Have her battlecock and beat it, slam the open shuttledore,
Till the Rayners² cease from reigning in the stews of Singapore.
She will always ask for more,
Waiting for her Minotaur;
Peering through the murky maze
For the sudden stroke that slays,
Till some spirit made of fire
Burns her up in his desire
And her sighs and smiles go floating skyward to the starry shore.

10 June 1950

¹ Thérèse ('Poppy') Fould-Springer (c.1914–1953), who suffered from sporadic mental and physical illness, married Alan Pryce-Jones after his engagement to Joan Eyres Monsell had been ended by her parents' opposition (he had no clear prospects).

² John Rayner (1908–90), Features Editor of the *Daily Express* during the 1930s, had been Joan Eyres Monsell's first husband.

The Holy Child

To Paul Betjeman

I

‘Who spawned him?’, quoth she in her chamber.
 ‘My husband? No surely not he,
 He never did much fancy me;
In fact I do not well remember,
 Except that it came about tea.

‘I was putting in work on the harness,
 A breast-collar held in my hands,
 When a vision showed me swaddling bands;
And I knew ’twas a strange Thomas More-ness¹
 That came from Celestial lands.

‘And now he is known to the neighbours
 For healing their colic and piles,
 This child who has never known smiles,
And delights in parochial labours
 And sitting alone on lone stiles.’

II

‘Not like his father?’ She smiles and winks,
And little she cares what the Vicar² thinks.

§ One possible model, in sensibility if not in exact metre, is Thomas Hardy’s *Satires of Circumstance*, 1914. The subject (at least to start with) is the allegedly immaculate conception (‘in came a dove’) of Betjeman’s musician son Paul (b. 1937), who emigrated to the US in 1962 and became a Mormon. The speaker in the first two parts is his mother, Penelope Betjeman.

¹ Maybe Henry VIII’s Chancellor Thomas More (1478–1535) stands here for the Catholicism for which he died.

² Aptly, the Vicar of St Mary the Virgin, Uffington, was from 1930 George A. Bridle (c.1872–1945).

Let gossips wag in the Gothic aisle.
She has a secret and she can smile.

‘The blacksmith, you say? No, no not he.
His brawny chest is too much for me.
Nor the cultured don from Casterbridge¹
Who lost his head on the White Horse Ridge.’²

‘My husband, I own it, is not my taste,
With his scented hands and wasp-like waist;
But what fathered my child was stranger than that;
He had no gloves and he wore no hat.

‘The window was open, in came a dove,
And that is all I have known of love.
A flutter of feathers about the room,
And I knew a young god was inside my womb.’

III

Barnby in F³ fills the Church’s gloom
And the minims mimic the trump of doom;
The Vicar intones the *Magnificat*,
 But he thinks of a room
Which has little to do with sharp or flat.

A figure lies prone on the boards therein,
And his cold face shows a ghastly grin,
Like one who has seen a lot too much
 And would fain not win
Forbidden delights of clasp and touch.

¹ Casterbridge is Thomas Hardy’s fictitious version of Dorchester, especially in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

² The White Horse ridge is the section of the Ridgeway above the village of Uffington, the Betjemans’ home, and is so called after the White Horse of Uffington, cut into the turf of the Berkshire Downs.

³ Sir Joseph Barnby (1838–96), English composer whose church music included an Anglican chant in F sharp minor.

A treble he sang, and his topmost C
Carried Dykes and Stanford¹ to ecstasy,
Till the Vicar taught him another tune
 And fain would see
Secrets untold in rhyme or rune.

He seized a ruler that lay by his side,
And flung at the Vicar in all his pride.
But against the Causer² who shall strive?
 The choirboy died
And the Vicar sings in the church alive.

¹ Two more English composers of sacred music, John B. Dykes (22/3) and Sir Charles Stanford (ibid.).

² God.

AFTERWORD

Printing the unprintable

HENRY HARDY

The following is a very slightly revised version of an article printed in the Oxford Magazine in 2012¹ together with the two poems on Patrick Leigh Fermor excluded from the original edition of this book.

I

MAURICE BOWRA (1898–1971) was one of the most celebrated Oxford figures of his day, perhaps of any day: prolific Greek scholar, Warden of Wadham for over thirty years, Professor of Poetry, Vice-Chancellor; wit, poetaster, leader of the ‘immoral front’ against the ‘prig front’; enemy of primness, prudery, pursed lips, self-righteous disapproval of illicit pleasure; liberator of the repressed, widener of horizons to the young. Between 1920 and 1965 he wrote a series of skilful but extremely coarse and scurrilous parodies of well-known poems, poking fun at his contemporaries, heaping up explicit sexual references couched in crude barrack-room terminology. He wrote these works neatly into a bound volume, recited them to his friends, circulated copies to a chosen few, but insisted that they should not be made public: in the climate of his times they would at the least have damaged his reputation, and possibly have destroyed his career.

But he must have known that they would one day see the light, and surely he wanted them to. They released his creative juices as nothing else, and displayed all the life that his self-controlled academic prose notoriously lacks. John Sparrow (1906–92), Warden of All Souls from 1952 to 1977, and Bowra’s literary executor, said that it was a pity Bowra had cut himself off from posterity because ‘his prose was unreadable and his verse was unprintable’.² Not indefinitely unprintable: Wadham College agreed to let me publish the poems under my own imprint to aid their development

¹ No 329, Michaelmas Term 2012, 5th Week, 10–13.

² In Hugh Lloyd-Jones (ed.), *Maurice Bowra: A Celebration*, 1974, 76.

fund, and Jennifer Holmes joined me as joint editor, researching and drafting the very necessary annotation; Julian Mitchell wrote a splendid introduction, and Bowra's verses finally appeared as a book in 2005, over thirty years after his death, under his own title, *New Bats in Old Belfries*.

But the text was not quite complete. Some of the subjects of the poems were still alive, and it was decided to give them the option to decline the inclusion of 'their' poems. By the time the book went to press, only two of the persons referred to were still with us, and both exercised their veto. One was the journalist, author and television presenter Ludovic Kennedy (1919–2009), to whom there was a passing reference that required only the word 'Ludo' to be blanked out. Kennedy had been treated by Bowra with dramatic ingratitude and rudeness when he was an undergraduate, and saw no reason to countenance Bowra's disobliging mention.

The other living target was the protagonist of two whole poems, which accordingly had to be represented in the published book by blank pages, ready to be filled in in later editions. This target, it can now be revealed, was Patrick ('Paddy') Leigh Fermor (hereafter 'PLF'), writer, traveller – and Cretan war hero as a result of his activities while serving in the Special Operations Executive during the Second World War. PLF, born in 1915, died aged 96 on 10 June 2011.

In an extended correspondence with myself, PLF showed that he was much put out by 'his' poems, especially 'The Wounded Gigolo', which he felt was 'a bit cracked'.¹ Possibly he took it too seriously: the poems were fantasies, not reportage. He vacillated about the other poem, 'On the Coast of Terra Fermoor' (is the misspelling of 'Fermor' a reference to Farmoor, near Oxford?), but in the end voted against, no doubt partly influenced by the opinion of his late wife, who 'thought that all the people mentioned in the collection would have been cut to the quick, however much they put on non-spoilsport faces'.² When James Morwood of Wadham visited PLF later in his Greek home to ask about his friendship with Bowra (on behalf of Leslie Mitchell, Bowra's biographer), he found

¹ Letters to Henry Hardy of 25 October 2004 and 4 March 2005.

² Letter postmarked 3 November 2004, published in *More Dashing: Further Letters of Patrick Leigh Fermor*, ed. Adam Sisman, 2018, 409–10.

that the hurt of reading the poems was still smarting. To me PLF wrote: 'Could Maurice's shade ponder all this now, I think I might emerge as more of a saviour than a spoilsport.'¹

The missing poems were printed for the first time in the *Wadham College Gazette* in December 2011, and the second, less indecorous, specimen appeared in the Christmas number of the *Spectator*. Not everyone approved, just as not everyone had approved of the publication of the main body of the poems in 2005. Some, especially PLF's friends, said it was too soon after his death to dishonour his memory in this way. Others took the stronger view that all material of this kind should be consigned to oblivion.

Why might one believe such things? And was I wrong not to yield to these views?

II

There are those who set a high value on privacy and believe that its dominion is properly wide, and those who are instinctively open and find it hard to identify with the secretive temperament. Relatedly, there are withered, joyless prudes who find all explicit reference to sexuality disturbing and offensive, and at the other extreme those who lose no opportunity to deploy crude sexual terminology. Most of us, perhaps, like myself, occupy a middle position, not objecting to such language on principle but seeing no need to make liberal use of it ourselves. Enjoying a naturally open temperament, formed in part by reaction against the needless, life-denying reticence of others, I became an enthusiast for the publication of Bowra's poems as soon as I discovered a typed transcript of them among the papers of Isaiah Berlin, and I have to make an effort to empathise with their detractors. Writing the poems was an important part of Bowra's personality, and their concealment, especially in the case of such a prominent Oxford character, would be a form of lying. Truth-telling is not everything, but it is a very great deal: if it does not trump all other values, it begins the argument with a head start. There was of course an era when 'salacious' information about the private lives of the great was routinely suppressed, and certain words and topics, especially in the sexual arena, proscribed or Latinised in 'civilised' literary contexts; but we have outgrown that culture now,

¹ Letter of 4 March 2005.

returning to the frankness of the Greeks, and literate writing is no longer automatically self-censored on this basis. *Ulysses*, *Lolita* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, to name but three, have freed us, and the law, from puritanical squeamishness. Sometimes, no doubt, this new-found freedom is overdone, descending into licentiousness and gratuitous linguistic exhibitionism, but that is a price worth paying for the opening of doors. 'Decency' of that narrow kind was a minor form of tyranny.

One can disagree about the literary merit of Bowra's poems, about the taste of those who enjoy them, and about what they tell us of their author. My own feeling is that the poems often reveal more about Bowra than about his subjects. They show an arrestingly unconventional facet of a famous scholar – an Achilles' heel, perhaps, and not necessarily an altogether attractive side to his personality, but a central part of what he was. We may speculate that his use of coarse language and his complete sexual explicitness stem from shortage of sexual experience, or even virginity, rather than from the varied and athletic sexual activity that he so lubriciously describes in others. There is something in common with Monty Python's celibate nudge-nudge, wink-wink man in a bar, who longs to be a player; a tone of hostile envy. But none of this amounts to a case for censorship or disapproval of publication. In any case, the impulse to censor is, in the longer term, self-defeating. Attempts to suppress information about, or 'improper' writing by, well-known figures with a foot (or more) in the Establishment tend to rebound in the end, giving more prominence to the offending matter than it would have enjoyed had it been allowed expression in the normal course of events. The poems about PLF are a case in point: had they been included at the outset, there would have been no pretext to exhibit them separately here or elsewhere.

I must not give the impression that *New Bats in Old Belfries* is solid, undifferentiated filth. It offers exhilarating versificatory brilliance and masterly parody, and supplies a great deal of social and literary entertainment, information and insight over and above its immediately noticeable unfurtive display of sexuality. Not that there is anything unsocial or unliterary about sexuality ...

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Douglas Matthews died in November 2020 at the age of ninety-three. His index was revised for this edition by Henry Hardy.