

The  
**W. H. Auden Society**  
**Newsletter**

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## John Bodley (1930-2004)

John Bodley, who shepherded Auden's posthumous books through the press at Faber & Faber for more than twenty years, died in London on 4 October 2004 at the age of 74. He was a friend and helper to scholars and others associated with W. H. Auden.

After the retirement in 1980 of Charles Monteith, his predecessor at Faber & Faber (see *Newsletter* 14), John Bodley took charge of the publication programmes of many of Faber's best-known writers, including T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, William Golding, and Stephen Spender. John, who was born in Brixton on 29 August 1930, was the son of a policeman. After attending grammar school, he joined Faber & Faber as a sales clerk at the age of 17, and continued to work at the firm until the end of his life, with one interruption for national service in 1949-51, when the Army sent him to Egypt and Israel as a corporal in the Intelligence services. His superior officer reported on his excellent work, but said he was too friendly to be a proper disciplinarian.

At Faber, after working in sales for some years, he became advertising manager, with an office next door to T. S. Eliot, then worked in publicity, and finally became an editor. He became a close friend and advisor to Valerie Eliot, and the existence of the first volume of her edition of Eliot's letters is a tribute to John Bodley's patient and persistent care.

John was loved and admired by his authors for his self-deprecating humour combined with a sharp wit, his taste for gentle gossip about the extravagant characters of some of his authors and their heirs, and for his profound, unassertive moral intelligence. Like Auden, he was a devout and active Anglican who favored the Anglo-Catholic wing of his church, and he felt that his religious orthodoxy compelled him a radical commitment to social and political justice. During his last illness, many of John's responsibilities passed into the expert hands of Paul Keegan, but he continued to work a few days each week. Thousands of readers who never heard his name are among the beneficiaries of his work, and he is greatly missed by his colleagues and friends. He is survived by his wife, the former Jacqueline Oakshott, a son, and, two daughters.

## Anthony Hecht (1923-2004)

Anthony Hecht, poet and critic, died on 20 October 2004 at the age of 81. He was best-known as for his formally precise and emotionally intense verse in seven books, from *A Summoning of Stones* (1954) through *The Darkness and the Light* (2001) and for his literary essays and reviews. His only book-length critical study of a single author was *The Hidden Law: The Poetry of W. H. Auden* (1993), and idiosyncratic and personal study that was as much an argument with an admired master as it was an exposition of the older poet's work.

Anthony Hecht was born in New York on 16 January 1923 to German-Jewish parents, and decided to become a poet during his undergraduate years at Bard College. After graduating in 1944 he was drafted into the Infantry and fought in both the European and Pacific theatres of war. He participated in the liberation of the concentration camp at Flossenbürg (mentioned in the subtitle of Auden's "Friday's Child" as the place where Dietrich Bonhoeffer was murdered by the Nazis). He spoke little about his experience of battle except to indicate that it was horrific enough to cause him to wake up screaming many years after the war was over.

After returning to America, he studied at Columbia, then at Kenyon College under John Crowe Ransom. In 1951, as the first poet to win the Prix de Rome fellowship at the American Academy in Rome, he lived for a time on the island of Ischia, where he met Auden. Thekla Pelletti (later Clark), a young American woman who was divorced after a brief early marriage to an Italian, visited Anthony Hecht on Ischia, and through him began the lifelong friendship with Auden that she recorded in her *Wystan and Chester* (1995). The book opens with a brief portrait of the young Anthony Hecht and an account of her connection with him in childhood and after.

After his time in Italy, Anthony Hecht taught at Smith, Georgetown and, for many years, at the University of Rochester. His first marriage ended in divorce; he is survived by his second wife, the former Helen d'Alessandro, two sons, and a grandson.

## **My Meeting with Dr John and Mrs Sheila Auden, 19th November 1982**

I had written in August 1981 to Dr John Auden, Wystan's elder brother, in connection with research that I was doing into early influences on Wystan of Frank McEachran, the schoolmaster who taught Wystan in the sixth form at Gresham's School, Holt, between Michaelmas 1924 and the end of the summer term 1925. Dr Auden responded very positively to my request for help. We had been in touch for well over a year and had exchanged four letters before we met. After we met we again wrote to one another. I will refer to him from now onwards by his Christian name. I already knew from John's first letter to me that he could not in fact recall Wystan having mentioned McEachran, but he admitted that his memory over many things was by that time imperfect—and I was after all enquiring about someone Wystan had known more than half a century before. John's letters however were so open and friendly that I wanted to meet him in any case.

Moreover I was looking for further leads in my ongoing general research into Wystan's life and work. I was not going to miss the opportunity to meet and talk with Wystan's elder brother, the brother with whom I knew that, although they were in many ways very different, Wystan was always in close sympathy. As soon as I telephoned to suggest a meeting John very kindly agreed to it and a suitable time was arranged. We met at his flat in Thurloe Square, South Kensington, London. He could not have been more cooperative and helpful to me throughout our meeting. And I also had the great pleasure of meeting his wife, Sheila. She was with us during some of our conversation and contributed much to it.

I have since used some of the material that I gathered from John in my article on McEachran in *Auden Studies 1* (1990) and also in my book *The Collected Poems of Humphrey Moore with a Memoir* (1997). Looking back, however, over my record of the meeting, I realise that there is a good deal of further material—about Wystan, John himself, and the Auden family—which I believe should be made available to all who are interested in Auden studies. I think that some of the things that I learnt relating to Wystan may well be previously unknown, even to Auden devotees. John was of course aware that I was planning to use the information that he gave me and he was in agreement with my noting down what he said. At the same time we

were both conscious of the fact that what John said, in answer to a host of unforeseen questions, would inevitably be spoken off the cuff.

Most of our conversation naturally took the form of questions and answers and I will reproduce the greater part of it shortly in this format – interspersed here and there with comments of my own. Our conversation, which sometimes included Sheila, was far-ranging and it has not always been possible or desirable to stick to a question-and-answer format. And moreover I have wanted to make various points of my own and to occasionally draw out an implication in something said, which for the sake of clarity I have put in brackets.

But let me first say a few things about myself which will help to explain something of the tenor of our conversation. I am an Anglican clergyman. At that time I was in a rural Suffolk parish with my first wife and young family. I think that the fact that I was married with two children, as was John himself, though his children were somewhat older than mine, was a significant factor in our developing relationship. And it helps to explain why, apart from my specific research interests, we focussed on some subjects more than others, e.g. on religion and the church, also on education, school and the family.

Very soon after I arrived John and Sheila asked me whether I had met Wystan – which indeed I had, in 1971 (see my article, “Auden on Christianity: A Memoir” in number 3 of the *Newsletter*) and I told them the main facts about the meeting. Sheila asked me whether I like poetry, and in particular she asked me whether I like the poetry of John Donne. I answered “yes, very much indeed” to both questions. She told me that she prefers Donne’s sermons even to his Holy Sonnets. John then talked of his love of Graham Greene’s novels. There followed a fair number of questions about my family and my parish and my life as a clergyman in rural Suffolk.

After this John mentioned his own connections with the Church of England on both sides of his family, a subject about which he would speak in detail later, and he talked a bit about his mother and father. He said of his mother’s side, the Bicknells: “They had a conceit – with no reason to possess one: they were very class-conscious. When engaged to father, my mother was told, ‘no one will call on you’.” He referred to a footnote somewhere saying that his mother was “unpleasant” and said: “this was untrue. But our father”, he went on, “was no mere cipher – he was knowledgeable in archeology and also a doctor”.

I asked John some questions about Wystan.

Q. “Do you prefer Wystan’s earlier or his later poetry?”



A. "His earlier."

Q. "What is your favourite poem by Wystan?"

A. "'In Praise of Limestone' – as a geologist I perhaps even influenced it in some ways."

Q. "What is your favourite book by Wystan?"

A. "*The Age of Anxiety*".

Q. "Can you please tell me what is your own understanding of Wystan's conversion back to Christianity?"

A. "Wystan's conversion back to Christianity was not due to our mother's death. We were both quite devastated but it was my conversion that was due to her death, not his – or rather the seeds of my conversion were sown in her death. I was devoted to my mother. When she died I had a sense of guilt. Mother had been fond of going to Matins at a church near our cottage in the Lake District. I was on leave from India and would drive her to church and not go in myself. I was 32 at the time and I used to go to the pub. This was almost the last I saw of her. I still remember her wistful look when I left her at the church porch. When she died I had a sense of shame and unkindness. I felt that I had shown an almost anti-Christian attitude. One has to go away from belief at some times in life. But I should have been kinder."

Q. "What are your views now about Christianity?"

A. "Indian Anglicanism was coloured so much by the Raj that I decided to join the Catholic branch of the Church (in 1951), to be less political and more universal. My faith went suddenly when I was in Nigeria. It was after my wife and I had been to a play put on by the Jesuits, *No Room At The Inn*. It was performed in fact in the house where Teilhard de Chardin died". (Sheila had not long before this praised the Jesuits for their "prowess and brilliance" though John had expressed some reservations but spoke of what she felt was "the hubris of much intellectual belief". At another point in our conversation, however, she talked of what she sees as the importance of belief and had said: "I believe in belief". (I think she had meant by this belief in the sense of religious affirmation). John went on: "It was a very theatrical, streamlined and professional production but lacking in real feeling and, I felt, sincerity."

"But I don't really know why my faith has gone", he continued. "Faith I think is a personal gift it can be kept or lost, given or taken away. Now I don't really feel anything. I light a candle at Midnight Mass [our conversation took place not all that long before Christmas], but I have no local affiliation to a church."

I had the sense that John was determined to be above all scrupulously truthful in giving his views about religion. I had the impression that in his view an absolutely unwavering “intellectual” commitment in religious matters is probably either hubristic or dishonest. He was of course a scientist by profession and I think that this coloured all his thinking – but the latter part of his remarks above indicate that he had an underlying supernaturalist conception of faith (not unlike that which is sometimes found in Graham Greene) and I think that perhaps this did not harmonise easily with his outlook as a scientist. At one point in our conversation about religion he said: “I have a sense of man’s great ignorance lit up a bit by science”. In this context he quoted what Aquinas had said after writing his *Summa*: “All this is so much chaff in reality”. I felt that where human knowledge is concerned John trusted primarily in science. This could shed what little light we human beings can rely on.

This aspect of John’s life and thought can surely serve as a key example to illustrate Edward Mendelson’s remark in the Preface to *Early Auden* (1981): “Wystan saw John and himself as pursuing lives that were parallel but mirror-opposites in their careers in science and literature as well as in their emotions”. John and Sheila’s disillusionment with the intellect is of course reflected in many cultural tendencies of our time, and Wystan in his Christian odyssey may be said to have had a complementary disillusionment with what he came to see as the modern fragmented and specialised intellect, but in his case the disillusionment led *into* Christian faith. (Apropos of *Early Auden*, John had in one of his letters to me of the year before, written in fact just after he had received a first copy of the book from the publishers, strongly recommended me to read it. “*Early Auden*,” he told me, “is excellent”.)

I felt overall that John had returned to the Church mainly because of his love of his mother and his sense that in this matter she had been morally in the right all along and of course he may well have been influenced too in the matter of religion by Wystan but somehow, he told me, he couldn’t “feel it” in himself. Sheila in this context spoke of “the dark night of the soul” being “necessary”. “Faith *would* come back”, she said.

Q. “Can you tell me something about Wystan’s relationship with the Catholic Church when he was in America?”

A. “The treatment of Father Reinhardt by the Catholic Church in America, for what Wystan thought a trivial offence, was outrageous

and put Wystan off Catholicism for life.<sup>1</sup> Wystan didn't like Catholics on the whole, with the exceptions of Father Reinhardt [a German priest and mutual friend with whom I myself once stayed when I was in Yakima in Washington State] and Father D'Arcy [Martin D'Arcy, the Catholic theologian whom Auden had met in Oxford in 1927]. Irish Catholics are impossible." As a priest I mention this part of what John told me with some reluctance but it does help to explain what Wystan says near the end of his essay in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims* 1956: "Into the question of why I have returned to Canterbury instead of proceeding to Rome, I have no wish to go in print"; and he adds, "The scandal of Christian disunity is too serious".

I next asked John some questions about his own life before returning to some further questions about Wystan.

Q. "Did you like your time at Marlborough?"

A. "I hated the first two years (1917-18). I was not good at games. Boys were roasted in front of fires. Most of the masters were away in the war. The inner school was run by fifth-form bullies. Boys were stripped of clothes and put under showers. I didn't know Louis (MacNeice)—we just overlapped. I knew him later. I liked it later when for two and a half years I was in the sixth form. I had a bicycle, loved the country around the school, and went all over the place—mostly around Wiltshire, Avebury and the Swindon area. The most formative period I think for boys is between 17 and 18. Usually the most influential teacher at public schools at that time was the classical master—it was the Empire influence. People who joined the Indian Civil Service usually had a classical background. My father was at Rugby. My elder brother, Bernard, went to Shrewsbury. He died suddenly, very suddenly, in 1978 at the age of 78. He had no previous heart trouble. He was sitting on a chair and fell off dead. I wonder whether the same might happen to me."

Q. "Did any of the masters at Marlborough strongly influence you?"

A. "Yes, a man called [A. G.] Lowndes strongly influenced me. I had hated Marlborough up until the time he arrived, around 1920. (He had previously taught at Bedales and King's College, Canterbury). After that I didn't hate it any more. Lowndes had been in the Merchant Navy. Then he got a singing scholarship to King's College, Cambridge. By implication I suppose he should have become a priest

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<sup>1</sup> Neither the author nor the editors have any further information about Father Reinhardt or his offense, and would be grateful for any clarification.

but in fact he went into science, and obtained his Cambridge Doctorate by his study of the movements of copepods.

"I admired him. He was from an unprivileged background. In the First World War he worked in the Nobel Explosives Factory at Ardrossen where he used a technique of his own which I adapted in India in a similar factory near Poona in 1942. He became the chief biology master at Marlborough, but he was very interested in geology too [the latter being John's chosen career after reading Natural Science at Cambridge]. He fired my enthusiasm. He was not really keen on the arts; he liked science. He opened my eyes. He made me see things I had not seen before, like mountains and stormy seas. He would quote from the book of Job which he liked. During the holidays he took several parties of boys, including sometimes myself, on field trips to various islands such as Skye, Arran and the Isle of Purbeck. He later did research in West Africa into copepods. [He also worked at the Marine Biological Research Laboratory at Plymouth, and took a sabbatical as science tutor at the King's School, Peterborough.] He died in West Africa.

"Lowndes and I went on a geological holiday together at Lulworth Cove; this was in 1921. Wystan joined us. It was there that Wystan met somebody, a stranger, who had a big influence on his life. A long correspondence between Wystan in Birmingham and this chap followed. It was partly sexual. I can't remember who he was but I am certain that he is not mentioned in any of the biographies. 1922 was the last time there was any real connection between myself and Wystan. From 1926 till 1953 I was in India. Wystan and I met from time to time when I was on leave: 1929 in Berlin—a riotous and disreputable time: And 1938 in Brussels—another riotous time. And in 1954 with my family I visited him on Ischia."

Q. "Was Lowndes a Christian believer?"

A. "Yes he was, but he didn't say much about it."

Q. "Did you and Wystan discuss religion together?"

A. "Not really. But I was very aware of his views as we grew up together. He was violently anti-Christian at about the age of 26. Wystan was always very interested in the saviour-healer-leader figure. The psychologist featured importantly among the healers today. He admired Homer Lane, but at this time he was very agnostic. Homer Lane said: 'The only difference between Jesus Christ and myself is I know how not to be crucified'. Wystan had been at Spa in Belgium and he went on to be psychoanalysed there.

“Wystan had wrong ideas of doctrine. For example his ideas about the Immaculate Conception were extraordinary: that it is an anti-semitic doctrine. He got it wrong. It’s a question of origin – of The Virgin Mary being born without material sin. The only occasion when I was ever annoyed with Wystan was when he pointed out to me once something that was lacking in the liturgy of the missal. That was the pedagogic element in him. Things of course were changing after Vatican II. The original Tridentine Mass was being used however and I knew it backwards – I loved the universal Latin. Wystan was a very good man. [John and Sheila in fact both said this.] People often do not realise what a good man he was. He had a marvellous smile, kind of all-embracing. He was a very good man. I don’t think that any biography has properly communicated this.”

Q. “Did Wystan ever preach in a church?”

A. “Yes, he preached once at St Giles; but he always referred to it as a disaster. His false teeth broke. He laughed about it a lot afterwards and told the story many times.”

Q. “Do you think that Wystan had a strong theology of the Church?”

A. “No. He didn’t talk much about the Church. He would say of churches – very High, medium or Low – and he complained if too Low. Most of the influences on our childhood were High Church. Mother and her sisters were very High Church. Two sisters lived in flats near Brooke Street. They went to St Albans, Holborn, which was very spiky and another church at Mecklenburg Square. Their brother, Harold, was Headmaster of the Mercers School nearby. Each aunt had a house in Monmouth. Wystan didn’t like them and they didn’t like him; he was precocious” (though John did like them according to Humphrey Carpenter in *W. H. Auden: A Biography*).

“Wystan said that he knew that his elders knew more than he did but they were more stupid. Wystan was boat-boy at St Mary’s, Monmouth. He looked angelic. Birmingham St Jude’s, where the family worshipped for some while, was also very High: Anglican prayers for the Pope in the vestry – they also had them at the church where mother and father married, near Pembridge Villas – that was very High too. Father was not so High Church. He was son of a priest, the first priest in fact of Horninglow Church near Burton-on-Trent in Staffordshire, and he had a brother who was a priest near Derby. Mother’s father was a Vicar of Wroxham in Norfolk. Wystan was not more sympathetic to Catholicism, but he preferred their liturgy.”

Q. "Did Wylan ever tell you why the ancient Greeks did not appeal to him?"

A. "I never remember him talking about them. He was not keen on marble statuary and that kind of thing. And modern Greeks are so different. I should imagine that these were factors in his not being too keen."

Q. "What did Wylan like to do most when he stayed with you in London?"

A. "He played with the children. And also he did crossword puzzles. He was very attached to Rita and Anita – both went to Oxford, St Anne's and St Hugh's respectively, and were there when Wylan was Professor of Poetry. (Wylan had the children on their own around 1954 on Ischia so that Sheila and I could have a holiday.) He frequently had long conversations with Sheila – for example, on Fairy Tales ('In fairy tales the younger son always did best', Wylan said), and on the book *Eric or Little by Little*, by Field Marshall Montgomery's father – which Wylan thought that Sheila and he were 'the only two people to have read'. When in London Wylan used to stay either with Peter Heyworth, Stephen Spender, Michael Yates or myself.

"When Wylan was staying at Thurlow Square in 1972 he nearly died one night. We were afraid he was going to die. He coughed up blood on the sheets. But he was all right the next day. I think it was caused by overdrinking and oversmoking. The next day he was fine on a television chat show. [I think that this was probably the Michael Parkinson 'chat' programme] Wylan aged very suddenly. His face changed. It became burnt-out." (Sheila felt that this was probably due to his "intellectual exertion – his creativity".) John said, "Graham Greene didn't age thus". Sheila replied, "But Greene wasn't a poet."

John went on: "He wasn't like that when I visited him on Ischia in 1954. Wylan used to say that he would die at 80 and in a sense he did. He died at 66 but he was an old man of 86. He drank too much and smoked too much. He had iced drinks too at regular hours, mid-day and 6 p.m. Wylan was in many ways lonely in later years. He was a family man. He always loved seeing the children."

Q. "Can you say something about the fascination for you of mountaineering?"

A. "I went on an expedition up K2, the second highest mountain in the world, with Michael Spender [Stephen's brother], the Jungian [it could be that the Jungian ideas in F6 came from him], Eric Shipton and H. W. Tillman. I didn't climb to the top. My love of mountains started with moors and Pennines in company with Wylan, then

came the Cambridge Mountaineering Club, and the Lake District—the scenery was why one climbed there—though Wystan didn't like the Lake District. I once nearly went on an Everest expedition. Wystan didn't in fact consult with me about F6 but he had picked up things that I said. Mountains are often symbolic in Wystan's poetry. Wystan himself was interested in fells. He didn't like high mountains.

"Later on, from 1928 to 1940, I worked with W. D. West (who I later discovered was also a former pupil of Lowndes) helping as a member of the Geological Survey of India to unravel the structure of the Himalaya. A later pupil of Lowndes, Sir Peter Medawar, became a Nobel Laureate."

Q. "Did you meet Chester Kallman?"

A. "Yes, Sheila and I met him when we visited Wystan on Ischia in 1954. He was still acting as cook. He was a stricken man. He summed up the whole of the Jewish problem in his life. It was awfully difficult for him to live with Wystan; his own talent was diminished by being with him. Wystan could be 'heavyweight' at times. Chester went to pieces after Wystan's death. He went to Athens to a boyfriend who died. He drank far too much and soon died in Athens. Both Sheila and I liked him tremendously. He was very versatile, very lovable, quite impossible; a brilliant linguist; he loved music, and really knew a lot about it; highly intelligent; a brilliant cook." [Sheila added that she thought him "a bad poet but a good librettist".] "Chester complained of Wystan's bad treatment of him, that Wystan treated him as a cook only—there was some truth in this—'I'm a musician and a poet'—he used to say. But Wystan was more faithful than Chester."

John then mentioned that Humphrey Carpenter had not all that long before sent him the MS of his biography of Wystan for his comments and approval. He told me: "I found it an interesting book but I quarrelled about it because I felt that there was too much in it about Wystan's sexual life, but I couldn't persuade Carpenter to delete some of the sexual parts". Carpenter, he told me had said, quoting Wystan's review of J. R. Ackerley's autobiography *My Father and Myself*, that it was important to Wystan in his understanding of personal relationships to know who sleeps with who and who does what to whom. John said: "Wystan might have said that then (in 1969), but I do not believe he thought so later in his life". I think that John had forgotten how late in Wystan's life this review was written.

Perhaps of relevance to John's attitude in this matter was something that he had said to me earlier in our conversation, in another

context: "When older so many things that did matter don't do so any longer". He had, he said, "a sense of having seen it all before, déjà vu".

John then talked of the ecumenical funeral service for Wystan at Kirchstetten in 1973 which he and Chester ("not a very pious Jew") had jointly organised. Chester felt that the authorities in Vienna etc. had not dealt well with Auden's death. He and John had to get round the Catholic priest at Kirchstetten (i.e. the priest of the church where Wystan had regularly worshipped) in order to have an ecumenical service. It was probably in fact John's tact and diplomacy that finally brought this about. John told me that it was Chester who had "organised it". The Catholic priest referred the idea to the Bishop who accepted it. An Anglican chaplain came from Vienna. The service was primarily Roman, then prayers were said alternately by both priests after.

Q. "Can you tell me a bit about your life in India?"

A. "I love all things Indian. As I have previously said, I was in India from 1926 to 1953. Sheila's father was the first President of the Indian National Council. She has no religion or perhaps she has all. if she would but realise it. But our children were brought up Christians, being European children, because it is the European religion. I was very impressed by an Anglican Bishop in India, Scott Westcott. And it was to an Anglican priest that I went when my first marriage [to Day Lewis's friend Margaret Marshall] broke up." (John's voice showed his emotion as he talked of this.)

John spoke of being offered the Presidency of the Geological Society while in India, but he turned it down, believing that an Indian should have the post.

"I got to know Malcolm Muggeridge in India. I like him but I think that in his image on television, his public persona, a slight odour of sanctity comes over – not in his writing however – and certainly not when one meets him personally. My Brahmin wife and I are here to be near our daughters, the younger of whom is a Consultant Surgeon at the London Hospital. But we miss India."

John and Sheila both mentioned their love of Eliot's *Four Quartets*; John had quoted a passage, he told me, in his obituary of his friend and colleague H. W. Tillman. They told me however that they neither of them were admirers of Yeats. They do not have a copy of his poems in the house. Wystan, John said, found his imagery "not true. He took exception to 'Byzantium', he found it uncongenial – too far from real life".



But Yeats's translation of the Upanishads, John said, was marvellous and was an exception. John told me that one of his most prized books was the translation of *The Ten Principal Upanishads* by Yeats and Swami Purohit, inscribed by the Indian co-translator. "Yeats", John said, "spoke not a word of Sanskrit but Swami Purohit said that with his help they had made a translation which brought out the meaning and sense even better in many places than the original."

I got the impression that John and Sheila were anti-Yeats because he stood for the old anti-scientific religion of poetry. John, unlike Wystan, took little interest in church religion as such. I got the impression that John was a scientist by inclination. He talked however at one point about his great love for the writings of Helen Waddell. He mentioned *The Wandering Scholars, Medieval Latin Lyrics*, and a new posthumous book which had just been published by Gollancz, a copy of which had been given to him by the editor. It was Helen Waddell he said who in general most influenced him towards Christianity. She remained a Presbyterian all her life. John said that he had tried but he could never get Wystan to really take a lot of interest in her. But, he said, he felt sure that Wystan would have liked her books if he had studied them. (And yet Wystan in fact quoted three passages from Helen Waddell in *A Certain World*).

I then turned the conversation back to a topic which we had already talked about early in our meeting: schools and education.

Q. "What are your views on educating children in independent schools away from home?"

A. "It depends on the locality where one lives, what the schools are like there and on the particular child in question, his needs – but I think that it is probably best for children to live at home until public school age. Boarding schools teach independence and self-reliance. I was very homesick at prep school – Wystan doesn't seem to have felt it. [Wystan and John both went to the same prep school at Hindhead in Surrey – where, according to Humphrey Carpenter, they were neither of them happy – but it looks, from John's remark, as though Wystan on the whole coped better.] He was much more self-sufficient.

John differed from Wystan in his view about this. Wystan wrote in "As It Seemed to Us", in *Forewords and Afterwords*, that if "if a boy is to be sent away to school at all, it is kinder to send him at an early age" because "A boy of seven or eight seems to get over his homesickness very quickly".

Sheila pointed out that a squire was sent away when of age to the castle of some lord, and in India a young man of age is sent away to a guru—there are good points, she said. John went on: “Many today are even questioning the validity of marriage, so that I can see much point in putting the emphasis more than ever before on the home.”

I had been with John for several hours and it was time for me to draw my questioning to a halt and leave.

I was struck overall by the very great kindness that John and Sheila had shown to me throughout our meeting. I am extremely grateful to them both for this and especially to John for his openness and generosity in sharing so much of himself and of the story of his life with me. When I left he said to me “I hope you will come again”.

JOHN BRIDGEN

*The author wishes to thank the Right Rev. Peter Walker for kindly making some helpful suggestions regarding this article.*

## Vin Ordinaire

The book that won Auden the King’s Gold Medal for Poetry in 1937 and that strongly consolidated his reputation as the most important young poet in England was *Look, Stranger!* (1936); published in the United States in 1937 as *On This Island*. It is important that the textual history of such a significant volume in Auden’s career be correctly recorded. That history necessarily begins with the book’s first words, its title. But current accounts of the reason why Auden’s collection came to be called what it was are not completely accurate (see, for example, Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (1981), p. 204). Specifically, the idea that in the summer of 1936 Faber and Faber had been unable to contact Auden in Iceland about the title and were therefore obliged by time pressure to choose one themselves is wrong. The correct sequence of events is as follows.

As early as the spring of 1936, the need for a title for Auden’s forthcoming book of poems was a subject of discussion in Auden’s circle. In a letter of 29 March 1936, before Auden had even finished writing the poems that would be included in the new collection, Isherwood, alluding to Auden’s love for Michael Yates, had joked to Spender that the title should be “The Passions of a Pedagogue.” This comment seems to indicate that while they were in Cintra together

working on *The Ascent of F6* Auden had discussed with Isherwood his uncertainty about what he should call his book. Auden's momentary state of doubt about his book's meaning — epitomized by his not knowing what to call it — is perhaps also signalled by the fact that Auden borrowed the final lines of "Certainly our city," the book's final poem and the final poem to be written, from someone else's version of someone else's words. Auden later told Kallman that the poem's bitterly pessimistic conclusion, "It's a world. It's a way," was a "misheard crib from Stephen's translation of a poem of Hölderlin's."

Auden returned from Portugal to England in early May 1936 with the poems for his book completed. At some point in April or May he seems to have plumped for the non-title *Thirty-One Poems* as the name of the collection. He also seems to have told Faber and Faber that he was ready to deliver the new book to them. Shortly before visiting the Faber offices while he was in London at the end of May, Auden sent an apologetic telegram to Frank Morley, a director at Faber and Faber, on 28 May, saying "PECCAVI. NOTHING IN MY HANDS I BRING". But, aware that he would soon be sailing to Iceland, he apparently delivered or posted his typescript to Faber not very long after that. On the title page of the typescript which Faber received (it is now in the Faber and Faber archives) "THIRTY-ONE POEMS" has been crossed out and "*Poems. 1936*" has been substituted in Auden's hand. (On the same typescript someone else has written "?Title".)

This first change of title was evidently made when or shortly after the typescript arrived at Faber because in the files of Curtis Brown, Auden's recently-hired literary agent in London, there is a memo of agreement with Faber and Faber about Auden's book dated "11.6.36". This memorandum refers to the book as "*Poems 1936*", though the title and the date may have been written in at different times. Thus it appears that Auden first envisaged calling the book simply *Thirty-One Poems*. Then — perhaps concerned because *Thirty-One Poems* suggested an unstructured accretion of lyrics rather than the coherently interconnected design which he had in fact given the book, and perhaps borrowing from the genre-and-date model established by Yeats's *Poems Written in Discouragement, 1912-13* or Hardy's "Poems of 1912-13" — Auden changed it to *Poems. 1936*.

Referring to "*Poems. 1936*", Edward Mendelson notes in *The English Auden* that "Faber's sales manager [W. J. Crawley] warned that Auden's title would mislead buyers into expecting a complete retrospective collection." One may infer in addition that Eliot, or

Faber and Faber, also did not want a title that too directly evoked, or seemed to compete with, Eliot's own recently-published *Collected Poems 1925-1935*. Eliot wrote to Auden in Birmingham on 18 June 1936 asking for a different title than *Poems. 1936* (copies of Eliot's letter and many of the other documents cited in this short essay are in the Faber archive). He also mentioned that "Frank Morley thought he had found a brilliant suggestion for a title with *Vin Audinaire*, but the sales manager does not like that either." (Someone at Faber evidently felt that "Vin Audinaire" was too good a crack to throw out: Faber used it as the heading for the advertisement of Auden's works which they placed in the November 1937 Auden "Double Number" of *New Verse*.)

Auden had in the meantime departed for Iceland and Mrs. Auden, who was acting as a kind of secretary for her son, replied to Faber and Faber on 19 June saying that she was forwarding Eliot's letter to Iceland. Meanwhile, the manufacturing process began. On 3 July, Miss Cowling, one of Faber production director Richard de la Mare's secretaries, wrote to Mrs. Auden asking her to correct the page proofs of "your son's POEMS". She enclosed two copies of the proofs as well as the original manuscript and noted that the proofs would also be corrected by "one of our readers". She went on to say, "The title of the book is wrong at present, as we are waiting to hear from him what he would like it changed to." Understandably enough, Mrs. Auden replied on 5 July that she felt unable to cope with correcting the punctuation of the book and so: "I have sent one copy of the proofs to him [Auden]."

Having received Eliot's letter which had been forwarded to him by his mother in mid-June, Auden sent Eliot a postcard from Iceland on 7 July 1936 suggesting as a title either "*It's a way*" or "*The Island*". He rejected Morley's less than wholly complimentary idea of "*Vin Audinaire*" and continued jokingly that "On the analogy of *Burnt Norton* [first published as the culmination of Eliot's *Collected Poems 1909-1935*] I might call it *Piddle-in-the-hole*". Whatever the sales manager's protestations, evidently a linkage between his own book and Eliot's was one that Auden was having trouble extirpating from his unconscious. Auden also wrote in the 7 July 1936 postcard to Eliot: "if you can think of a better [title] please do." The timing of other correspondence to and from Iceland suggests that this postcard, posted on 7 July, only reached London towards the end of the same month.

Meanwhile, Eliot on 13 July circulated a memo to his fellow Faber directors suggesting "CERTAINLY OUR CITY / with sub-title / Poems

1936" and he noted "This is the only phrase I can dig out of the text that seems to be applicable to the book as a whole." His idea has been crossed out on the copy of his memo in the Faber archives, and underneath Eliot's typed words someone (probably not Eliot) has written "Some Possible Dream / Into the Undared Ocean / LOOK! STRANGER".

On 31 July Mrs. Auden wrote to Miss Drew, another of de la Mare's assistants: "His [Auden's] last letter was posted on 10 July.... He has received my letter in which I enclosed one from Mr. Eliot asking for a new title, but did not answer this point." Evidently she was not aware that Auden had already written directly to Eliot about this. The two suggestions he had offered – *It's a Way* and *The Island* – were narrowed to one shortly afterwards. Miss Drew wrote to Mrs. Auden on 5 August 1936: "Your son's own proofs arrived yesterday morning, and he had written in a quotation from the last poem, 'It's a way', for the title."

So, Auden's decision on a title for the book was in the Faber and Faber offices by 4 August 1936. But it was not until 19 August, two weeks after Auden's second, and final, suggestion arrived in Russell Square, that John Easton (director of MacLehose, the printers whom Faber habitually dealt with) wrote to de la Mare: "Thank you for your letter of 18 August informing us that the above [*Look, Stranger!*] is the title of POEMS 1936. We will revise the preliminary pages, as requested."

The exclamation mark in the title *Look, Stranger!* (originally, as we saw, someone at Faber had suggested "*Look! Stranger!*") originated with the publishers. The poem from which the title is drawn, "Look, stranger, at this island now," was originally written to be heard as part of a film soundtrack and the hectoring note of exclamation added on the title page of the English edition is distinctly out of key with the almost eerie intimacy of the poem's calm, sibilant voice. Whoever came up with the idea was probably remembering a similar opening in an earlier Auden poem that had appeared under the Faber imprint: the poem beginning "Look there!" first collected in the second edition of *Poems* (1933).

Perhaps for this reason, perhaps for others, the book's title did not sit well with the book's author. In late September 1936, shortly before the official day of publication, Auden, who was now back in England, wrote to de la Mare saying he disliked the title *Look, Stranger!*: "I really don't like it at all, and was a little hurt that I was never told.". Eliot was by this time away in the United States, and de

la Mare passed Auden's complaint on to Frank Morley, who responded to Auden on 28 September 1936: "De la Mare has handed me your card about the title LOOK STRANGER, with the note that it's too late to make any change. We were in great difficulty about the title, because you had just gone to Iceland and we couldn't consult you about it; and LOOK STRANGER was the best that the synod composed of Eliot, [Geoffrey] Faber and me, could produce. Actually, though I didn't suggest it, I don't think it's bad as a title — though I admit you know best about that. But as we are too late to change, there isn't much that I can say, except that I hope it won't do any harm."

At an early stage in the production process Auden had just about given Eliot permission to come up with another title, as long as it was "better" than his own ideas. Clearly he did not see *Look, Stranger!* as being an improvement. Even after receiving Morley's off-hand apology, he remained dissatisfied by the title that his British publishers had chosen, calling it in a letter to his American publisher in November 1936 "invented" and "bloody" and "like the work of a vegetarian lady novelist." For the American edition of the book, which was to be published a few months after the English one, he asked Bennett Cerf of Random House: "Will you please call the American edition *On this island.*" Cerf did.

There is said to be a fog of battle in which confusion, haste and miscommunication are as important factors in determining the outcome of the conflict as the generals' carefully laid plans of engagement. Obviously, there is also a "fog of business" in which harried and lapsing (and, during the summer holiday period, short-staffed) publishers, especially commercial publishers like Faber and Faber, operated and operate. Scholarship cannot afford to forget the actually existing conditions under which books were and are written and made. But Morley was wrong to say that Faber did not receive Auden's title in time to have used it: they must either have overlooked, forgotten or rejected Auden's request to call his book "*It's a Way.*" The correspondence in Faber's own archives shows that Morley's comments about being "in great difficulty" and not being able to "consult" Auden in Iceland about the book's title are not accurate.

With the added benefit of a few months' clarifying distance from the time when he had finished the poems themselves, Auden's unhappiness with the English title of his book forced him to think harder about the underlying content and meaning of the poems col-

lected there. *On This Island*, Auden's final title for this crucial book is a slightly rephrased version of the second half of the line of which "Look, Stranger!" is the misquoted first half: "Look, stranger at this island now". In choosing *On This Island* Auden was circling back towards the motif of the other suggestion he had given Eliot in early July: *The Island*. I think what Auden had realized by November 1936 was that, rather than a city or a dream or an ocean or a stranger or any of the other keynotes tentatively sounded by the various titles he and others had considered during the spring and summer, what was crucial to the book and to its deep subject was the emblem of "this island." Figuratively, the "island" is England, or Little England, itself, the place that elsewhere in the book Auden Shakespeareanly describes as "our little reef... This fortress perched on the edge of the Atlantic scarp." For that reason not least, knowing exactly what Auden really felt this magical volume was about matters to us, his critics and readers. When we think about the book, the idea of the "island," since it is the volume's deepest idea, should be uppermost in our minds.

After all, for a few years in the 1930s Auden *was* the "island"'s national poet. Indeed, with exquisite insinuation Wyndham Lewis in 1937, the year in which Auden won the King's Gold Medal, called Auden a "national institution." Even the unbookish George VI and his mandarin literary advisors may have intuited that Auden's reputation as a national voice was crystallizing. In a break with precedent, the monarch personally presented the poet with the medal. That happened at a ceremony in Buckingham Palace in late November 1937. Strangely or not so strangely, the holiday period, a month or so later, was to be the last Christmas that Auden spent on this island for the next 35 years.

NICHOLAS JENKINS

## **Meeting Auden: First Encounters and Initial Impressions**

**Tom Driberg, British MP and journalist: Reading *The Waste Land***

[T]he undergraduate members of the House (as Christ Church, Aedes Christi, is familiarly known) were not all of the sort whom my political comrades denounced as the idle rich. The most delightful, and in the long run the most rewarding friendship that I formed there was

with Wystan Auden – destined to become, after T.S. Eliot, the greatest poet of my lifetime. I may possibly have the right to claim a small share in this triumph; for, only a few years ago, he gave me a copy of one of his books inscribed ‘To Tom Driberg, who made me read “The Waste Land.”’ His recollection was correct: we read this truly epoch-making poem for the first time together; read it, standing side by side in my rooms, in a copy of the first issue of Eliot’s review, *The Criterion*... (Oxford, 1925)

*Ruling Passions* (Jonathan Cape, 1977)

### **Stephen Spender, poet: Fantastic fads**

When Auden and I did meet it was...at a luncheon party ...This first meeting appeared to be a humiliating failure. During the greater part of the meal, Auden, after having cast a myopic, clinically appraising glance in my direction, did not address a word to me. When coffee was served, he jerked his head with a gesture which pulled his chin up, and said: ‘Who do you think are the best poets writing today?’ I answered nervously that I liked the poetry of W\_\_\_\_. Auden said: ‘If there’s anyone who needs kicking in the pants, it’s that little ass.’ Then he left, to my surprise he asked me to come and see him at his room in Christ Church.

Calling on Auden was a serious business. One made an appointment. If one arrived early one was liable to find the heavy outer door of his room, called ‘the oak’, sported as a sign that he was not to be disturbed. When with him, one was liable to be dismissed suddenly and told the interview was at an end.

On the occasion of my fulfilling my first appointment, he was seated in a darkened room with the curtains drawn, and a lamp on the table at his elbow, so that he could see me clearly and I could only see the light reflected on his pale face. He had almost albino hair and weakly pigmented eyes set closely together, so that they gave the impression of watchfully squinting. He jerked his head up and asked me to sit down. There followed a rather terse cross-examination in which he asked me questions about my life, my views on writing and so on. . .

He walked very fast on flat feet, with striding angular movements of his arms and legs and jerkings of his head. Once he had been told by a doctor that he must walk as little as possible, so he immediately began going for thirty-mile walks. He had a theory that the



body is controlled by the mind. He would explain a headache, a cold or sore throat in what are now called 'psychosomatic' terms. ...

Auden had fantastic fads. He was extremely particular about food, grumbled outrageously if everything was not arranged as he wished, sometimes carried a cane and even wore a monocle. Generally he organized the people around him where he stayed to suit his whims, but he kept his hosts in a good humour. He was not witty. His humour was of a buffoonish kind and consisted partly of self-mockery. 'I have a face of putty,' he said. 'I should have been a clown.' Or, 'I have a body designed for vice.' He smoked, ate, and drank cups of tea all in great quantities. (Oxford, 1927)

*World Within World* (Hamish Hamilton, 1951)

### **Louis MacNeice, poet: Hand-feeding ideas**

Auden, then as always, was busy getting on with the job. Sitting in a room all day with the blinds drawn, reading very fast and very widely – psychology, ethnology, Arabia Deserta. He did not seem to look at anything, admitted he hated flowers and was very free with quasi-scientific jargon, but you came away from his presence always encouraged; here at last was someone to whom ideas were friendly – they came and ate out of his hand – who would always have an interest in the world and always have something to say. (Oxford, 1928)

*The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography* (Faber, 1965)

### **Naomi Mitchison, novelist and poet: Looking for a job**

I heard about the bright new star, young Wystan Auden, from Dick Crossman, who showed me some early poems, and I thought at once, this is it, and made contact. In a while I got him to send me some poems to be published in *The Realist*, just before it perished from lack of financial backing. The first letter of his which I have must be from 1929 and reads:

Dear Mrs. Mitcheson,

I hope you will excuse my writing to you. Do you by any chance know of a job for me? Anything from nursing to burglary: Is it possible to get into a publishing firm in any capacity? If you should know of anything I should be most grateful if you would let me know. Also could you come to lunch next week, any day but Tuesday?

Yours very sincerely

Wystan Auden

Instead I asked him to tea and suggested that he coached [son] Murdoch, who had been ill following diphtheria, and needed to pick up on Latin. When he came I used to see that he got a solid tea with scones or crumpets or cake. That year he helped to decorate our big Christmas tree, standing nice and tall, able to reach the top branches, on the stepladder... (London)

*You May Well Ask: A Memoir 1920-1940* (Victor Gollancz, 1979)

### **Mazo de la Roche, novelist: Bound to improve**

René [son] was to enter Downs School...I had an especial pleasure in going to the plays at the school and to the sports. How those little fellows could dive and swim in the big pool! W.H. Auden was then a master there. I had read some of his poems and meeting him briefly I told him I was glad that René was to have a poet as one of his teachers. He was rather a heavily built young man with hair so fair it was almost straw-coloured. Of him Geoffrey Hoyland remarked to me, with a troubled yet magnanimous smile:

‘Well, he’s young and I think he’ll improve. Yes, he’ll surely improve.’ (Bristol, England, mid-1930s)

*Ringing the Changes* (Macmillan, 1957)

Compiled by DANA COOK

*Dana Cook is a Toronto editor and collector of literary encounters. His compilations have appeared in a wide range of newspapers, magazines and journals. Further installments will cover Auden’s years in America.*

## **Notes and Queries**

### **“We are all on earth to help others” revisited**

In *Newsletter 23* we reported that the source had been discovered of a line frequently attributed to Auden, “We are all on earth to help others; what on earth the others are here for, I don’t know.” The line was part of a recording made by an English music-hall comedian, Vivian Foster, who called himself the Vicar of Mirth. Further details have since emerged. The recording that included this line was “The Parson Addresses His Flock,” issued in 1923. A CD version of all of Vivian

Foster's recordings has been released in the Windyridge Variety series ([www.musicallcds.com](http://www.musicallcds.com)) and a brief excerpt may be heard at [www.audensociety.org/vivianfoster.html](http://www.audensociety.org/vivianfoster.html) on the Society's website.

### **A revised census of Auden's *Poems* (1928)**

The previous number of the *Newsletter* included a preliminary census of Auden's first book, the 1928 *Poems* privately printed by Stephen Spender. Lady Spender and others have provided extensive further information on the book, and a revised census will appear in the next *Newsletter*.

## **Recent and Forthcoming Books**

*February House*, by Sherrill Tippins, is a history of the house at 7 Middagh Street, Brooklyn Heights, where Auden and many of his friends lived in 1940. The book, which includes previously unpublished material by and about Auden and the other residents of the house, will be published by Houghton Mifflin in February 2005.

Members of the Society will take special pleasure in *The Sunday Philosophy Club*, the first of a new series of novels by Alexander McCall Smith, author *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* and many other novels that will give great pleasure to readers who find Auden's views sympathetic. The new book is published in the UK by Little, Brown and in the US by Pantheon. Its heroine, Isabel Dalhousie, is an enthusiastic reader of Auden's poetry (with the exception of his two last books), and often quotes or recalls it in the course of the story.

Among other books on Auden and his work that are scheduled to appear in the next year are Arthur Kirsch's study, *Auden's Christianity*, to be published by the Yale University Press, and a study of Auden's sources by Rachel Wetzsteon, to be published by Routledge. Details on these and other forthcoming titles will appear in the next *Newsletter*.

## An Appeal for Expertise in Accountancy

The Society would be very grateful to hear from any member living in the UK who has some knowledge of accountancy, and who would be willing to donate perhaps two hours of his or her time, once a year, in order to prepare a simple account of the Society's income and outgo. Ideally this would be someone living in or relatively near London. If you fit this description, could you kindly get in touch with the Society at the postal address listed elsewhere on this page?

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Receipts available on request.

Payment may also be made by credit card through the Society's web site at: <http://audensociety.org/membership.html>

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