

The
W. H. Auden Society
Newsletter

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A Note to Members

The Society's membership fees no longer cover the costs of printing and mailing the *Newsletter*. The *Newsletter* will continue to appear, but this number and the one that will follow it in mid-2009 will be the last to be distributed on paper to all members. After the next number, future issues of the *Newsletter* will be posted in electronic form on the Society's web site, and a password that gives access to the *Newsletter* will be made available to members.

Members who wish to continue to receive paper copies may do so by subscribing at the rate currently charged to institutions. See page 31 for the full table of fees. Further details will appear in the next number and on the society's web site, audensociety.org.

So that we may notify members when a new number of the *Newsletter* appears on line, we would be grateful if members would send their current e-mail address to: makerofweb@audensociety.org

Auden the Scientific Greshamian

The laws of science have
Never explained why novelty always
Arrives to enrich (though the wrong question
Imitates nothing). Nature rewards
Perilous leaps. The prudent atom
Simply insists upon its safety now,
Security at all costs; the calm plant
Masters matter then submits to itself,
Busy but not brave; the beast assures
A stabler status to stolen flesh,
Assists though it enslaves.

- *The Age of Anxiety*

What has been written on the influence of Gresham's on Auden's development has sometimes been from a partial view of its life and philosophy in Auden's time at the school (1920-25). In particular little attention has been paid to the scientific education there at that time and to the curriculum. This piece grows out of my research in the archives of the school in March 2008, in an attempt to fill those gaps. It was after all as a scientist that Auden went up to Oxford. His education at Gresham's school was unusual, not least in its emphasis on science. Thus began his life-long interest in scientific matters and explains his confidence in introducing them into his writing. When he returned to Christ Church in his 60s a colleague there then recalls that the only periodical Auden read regularly was the *Scientific American*. He arrived at the college in 1925 as an Exhibitioner in Natural Science and studied it for his first term there. Between these points in his life his knowledge of scientific concepts and terminology and his fearless acceptance of new scientific thinking, especially in psychology, make him almost unique among the leading English poets.

The very high-powered scientific teaching and the impressive range of the school's intellectual life at that time therefore deserve attention and are well documented in the school's archives. The school's deep and enduring impact on Auden is not always recognised. He acknowledged it himself when he wrote in a Review in the *New Yorker* in the 1960's, "Although I soon realised I was not cut out to be a Scientist, I am equally glad that I spent my last two years at school in the exclusive study of Chemistry, Zoology and Botany."

Auden's House on Fire Island

The summer cottage in Cherry Grove, Fire Island, which Auden, together with James and Tania Stern, owned in the late 1940s and lived in during the summers of 1946 and 1947, now belongs to William McGarvey. Mr McGarvey is interested in joining in a partnership with an organization or individual who might want to use the house for purposes such as (for example) making it available as a temporary resident for the recipient of a fellowship, or some similar purpose. The house is unquestionably the one that Auden lived in—Mr McGarvey has tax records from the period—and although it has been much improved it is still recognizably the same cottage. An aerial photograph of the house may be seen on Google Maps at this web address: <http://tinyurl.com/7bsx2x>

Anyone interested in pursuing a partnership involving the house should e-mail Mr McGarvey at: setsbygeorge@aol.com

Recent and Forthcoming Books and Events

The Manuscript, Archive & Rare Book Library at Emory University has published an illustrated and annotated catalogue, *“Democratic Vistas”: Exploring the Raymond Danowski Poetry Library*, curated by Kevin Young. This large-format 152-page volume includes photographs of Emory’s copies of Auden’s *Poems* (1928) and *Poems* (1930), the latter with a verse inscription to Stephen Spender. Other illustrated items include a typescript of Auden’s “Spain” with his handwritten explanation of why he refused to sign it, and his copy of *The English Struwwelpeter* (c. 1895). The list price of the catalogue is \$45, but Auden Society members may order it for \$40 by noting “Auden Society” on the check. For the address and other details, please visit:

<http://marbl-dev.library.emory.edu/democratic-vistas-catalog.html>

Volume II of the British Film Institute’s three-volume series *The GPO Film Unit Collection*, a compilation of films made in the 1930s and 1940s, will be released on 23 February 2009. It will include *Calendar of the Year*, featuring Auden in an acting role as a thin and rather sinister Father Christmas. *Fairy of the Phone* is directed by Auden’s friend and flatmate William Coldstream and is a deliriously funny spoof musical promoting telephone etiquette to audiences unfamiliar with the latest technology. *Night Mail* is included and needs no introduction. The other highlight is *God’s Chillun*, a film about the slave trade, salvaged from the abandoned Auden-Britten collaboration *Negroes*. Details will be posted on the British Film Institute web site.

In March of 2009, Oxford University Press will publish *From Gibbon to Auden: Essays on the Classical Tradition* by G. W. Bowersock.

Commissioned by James Jarvis and the Exmoor Singers of London, British Composer James Lavino composed three settings of Auden’s poetry for an unaccompanied choral performance. The pieces were performed at the Southbank Centre in London on 20 October 2008.

Jim Hoyland recently unveiled a plaque at the Downs School with the inscription, “W. H. Auden, the poet, taught at The Downs 1932-1935.” It sits opposite a large plaque in memory of Hoyland’s father.

The school was led by a Headmaster of strong liberal views and a passionate commitment to science, J. R. Eccles, who was, in Auden’s time there, at the height of his powers. The academic life he encouraged fostered self-expression and the liberal sympathies of many of the staff, parents and pupils struck a chord, which helped to give Auden the mind set with which he approached political and social issues throughout his life. For example, soon after Auden matriculated in 1920 the school chapel collected funds for relief of the famine in Russia - raising £50. We can take it that the Headmaster approved.

The ridicule of the pupils, not least Auden himself who delighted in mimicking him, has tended to obscure Eccles’s intellectual and moral weight; as a result, Eccles has often suffered in comparison with his great predecessor, G.W.S. Howson, who appointed him in the year 1900 when there was effectively a refoundation of the school at the beginning of Howson’s headship. Howson was a good scientist: he had a First Class Honours degree in Science from Merton College, Oxford and had taught Chemistry for 13 years at Uppingham before being appointed to Gresham’s. The appointment of a scientist as Head was itself a rarity then. He made science the major intellectual activity of the school, at that time virtually unique as a concept. This must have encouraged the Governors to appoint Eccles from the Common Room to succeed him, for he was thoroughly imbued with Howson’s ideas.

Eccles’s ability as a scientist has been obscured by his reputation for other things. He had a First in parts one and two of the Natural Science Tripos and was an Exhibitioner of King’s Cambridge. He regarded Geology as his best subject, as he mentions in his autobiography, and taught physics throughout his time at Gresham’s. In 1919 the CUP published his *Advanced Lecture Notes on Light*. It is not hard to see his influence in Auden’s “In Praise of Limestone.” The first Oxbridge award of the century, in 1906 in Lord Reith’s time there as a pupil, was a science scholarship to Cambridge, when the Sixth was very small indeed. A considerable level of success in science, including Auden’s Exhibition in 1925, was achieved throughout the 1920s. It is significant that many of the awards were in Science at a time when far fewer of these were given and virtually none in Classics that were then more common in most schools.

Eccles’s pride in the Science Department in which he taught was also made obvious in his speech on Speech Day in 1925 when he mentioned first the two exhibitions won by the five scientists of that

year in Science (one by Auden) and the six Firsts in Science won by Old Greshamians in Cambridge that summer and only mentioned the other awards and successes in other subjects later and *en passant*. This strength in Science was also the result of the unusually heavy emphasis on it in the curriculum and in the school's intellectual life generally. It was what had attracted the Audens to the school. They wanted to encourage Wystan's strong interest in industrial archaeology and the factories he had seen in the North and the Midlands during his early years.

By far the largest society in the school was the Natural History Society that was founded by Eccles, its first President, in 1918, just at the end of Howson's time, probably as the result of the opening up of opportunities for travel and more expansive thinking that came with the end of the Great War. Eccles stood down as President in 1920 as the burden of Headship became pressing but he retained a strong interest in it and was a member throughout Auden's time at the school. By 1921, when Auden is listed as joining, it had 109 boys in it, half the school, and eighteen adults were members, including academic and non-academic staff. In 1921 it had eight sections: Anthropological, Architectural and Archaeological (the one WHA joined); Astronomical (the school had a telescope and made significant finds); Botanical, Chemical and Physical; Entomological; Geological (the school had a huge collection of rock samples) and Zoological. This last produced a steady stream of distinguished ornithologists throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Boys could join more than one section. Each section had its own chairman, sometimes a member of staff, sometimes a pupil. All meetings were minuted and their reports printed. The head vetted these reports before publication, or rather he complained when they were not vetted. The formality of the proceedings is perhaps not surprising but the equal status of the boys and the members of staff indicate a freedom of discussion and general good relations between them. The 1921 diary of one student, J. I. Sapwell, often makes this clear. He indicates, for example, that Auden's father loaned Auden his slides of ecclesiastical buildings for the Architectural section, despite the master's misgivings as to whether this arrangement would work.

An annual highlight at Gresham's was the sections' exhibitions each summer, another of Eccles's ideas. The archives' reports of talks,

Notes and Queries

A Beckett echo?

The first sentence of Samuel Beckett's novel *Murphy*, published in the spring of 1938, reads: "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new." Later that year, Auden wrote in "Musée des Beaux Arts": "the sun shone / As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green / Water". Nature's inevitability was not a new theme for Auden in the 1930s; for example, in "Wrapped in a yielding air," in 1937, he had written: "Determined on Time's honest shield / The lamb must face the tigress." But his line in "Musée des Beaux Arts" seems strikingly close to Beckett's sentence. Are there any other echoes of Beckett's work in Auden (or echoes of Auden in Beckett)?

A lost translation refound

Auden has long been known to have translated Erika Mann's cabaret song "Cold" for the English version of her revue *The Peppermill* that was first performed in New York in January 1937. Until recently, the text of this translation was unknown to Auden scholars, although it has been available in print since 1995. Andrea Weiss's *In the Shadow of the Magic Mountain: The Erika and Klaus Mann Story* (University of Chicago Press, 2008) quotes a few stanzas of the translation from a typescript in the Monacensia Collection of the Munich Library. The complete text appears in the 1995 second edition of Helga Keiser-Hayne's *Erika Mann und ihr politisches Kabarett "Die Pfeffermühle" 1933-1937* (Rowohlt, 1995).

"One sidecar and one C.P.S."?

In *Paid on Both Sides*, when Kurt and Culley ask Zeppel for drinks, Kurt asks for "one sidecar and one C.P.S." A sidecar is the familiar cocktail made from brandy, lemon juice, and orange liqueur, first recorded by the *OED* in 1928, the year when Auden wrote his play. But what is a C.P.S.? It is not listed in any manual of bartending, nor in any dictionary or other source that I have consulted. I suspect that it might be a schoolboy joke, familiar to one or more of Auden's friends, but have never found a definitive answer. Does anyone know what a C.P.S. might have been?

In his last section, Sharpe provides the extraordinarily valuable service of walking us through the vast forest of critical writing on Auden. He is, as in his other chapters, an opinionated and frequently feisty tour guide, but he is also gracious enough to let the critics and theorists he discusses speak for themselves. In the course of this section's thirty-odd pages he surveys various schools of thought on "early" versus "late" Auden; English versus American Auden; Auden and the 1930s; Auden and other writers; Auden and theory; and tributes to Auden by other poets. While this section is perhaps the one that might most easily lend itself to banner-waving or barnstorming, Sharpe remains judicious, providing summaries and judgments without a hint of brusque dismissiveness or obvious favoritism. This section—yet another testimony to the study's breadth and usefulness—will be an immense boon for anyone doing any sort of research on Auden's work.

Perhaps the highest praise I can offer of Sharpe's terrific book—the best centenary tribute I can imagine—is that its intelligence and zest, its fair-mindedness and scope, seem like precisely the qualities that Auden himself would have enjoyed very much. Readers will too.

RACHEL WETZSTEON

Rachel Wetzsteon is the author of four books of poems including the forthcoming Silver Roses (Persea, 2010), as well as a critical work, Influential Ghosts: a Study of Auden's Sources (Routledge, 2007).

mostly given by pupils, reveal an extraordinary level of sophistication. Auden addressed the Chemical and Physical section with his own slides on "Enzyme Action" when he was in the Upper Sixth. The catalytic properties of enzymes had only been recognised in 1893 but their protein nature was not confirmed until 1926; knowledge of their action would have been an exciting aspect of contemporary biology in 1925 when the talk was given. The next talk to the Section was by Stephen Spender's elder brother Michael on "Matters Leading to Quantum Theory"; Michael went on to get a scholarship in Science to Cambridge and a First in his finals. The boys' mutual education process was a feature of the Society well illustrated in Sapwell's diary:

4 March: *Hutchinson suddenly had a brain wave on chemistry. If you can make mixed ethers why shouldn't one make a mixed inorganic oxide? (The formulae are given.) We intend to investigate this and we think the best way will be to try and fuse together dry sodium and dry KOH in an atmosphere of nitrogen.*

12 March: *Saturday, Hutchinson (they shared a study) was in a bad temper preparing for his paper. I went to his paper in the evening on "Variation and the Origin of the Species." It was quite good and I am sure it did me a lot of good from the biological point of view.*

There is no record of the explosion that would have been likely to take place if they had attempted the experiment mentioned in the first of these excerpts. Throughout the diary Sapwell records he and Hutchinson as having free access to the labs at any time of evening or during the day and conducting unsupervised experiments either on their own initiative or as part of the teaching programme. Eccles records in his autobiography that all rooms were always unlocked and had no lab stewards. Auden, too, as he joined the Science 6th two years later, would have benefited from this freedom. His academic progress, and the curriculum he followed particularly in the Sixth Forms, are well documented in the school's archives from "Form and Set" lists that describe the Form teachers and staff taking the sets. After getting his exhibition to Oxford Auden is not listed as having formal sets; his work would have been loosely supervised but not on a class basis.

Tucked into Sapwell's diary is an individual timetable for one of his Science 6th terms, providing a clear example of the academic freedom that deeply characterized Gresham's. For example, much time throughout the week was assigned to "Extra", especially in the first two hours of the morning—time when those being taught are at their most receptive. It is possible to see from his diary that these "extras" were either earmarked at the beginning of each term to fit the individual needs of a boy for tuition, or on an *ad hoc* basis if lessons had been missed, or for extra tuition needed for the whole set or for a boy on his own. Much of this "extra" time though was left unassigned—in Sapwell's case, fifteen of the forty lessons each week. The boys at any time could use the laboratories for their own experiments or to pursue their own ideas. There are frequent references to this in Sapwell's diary. Let one suffice:

22 January: *In the evening I went over to the Physics lab as Hutchinson wanted to do an experiment to find the heat developed in contracting a muscle. He was at a meeting of the Sociological Society for a long time while I was fitting up the apparatus and in the end we did not do the experiment so I wasted a good hour over there.*

One assumes a similar freedom was given in all subjects, and this freedom explains much of school's success in developing the unusual levels of achievement in so many of its boys of that time. There was also considerable freedom of choice of Sixth Form courses that could be tailored to an individual's interests and needs—hence Auden's choice of Chemistry, Botany and Zoology and the boys' work on their own outside the timetable. This produced an unusual and challenging regime designed to promote private study and individual initiative.

During Auden's last two terms at Gresham's he followed a largely self-directed programme of study, and had time to pursue his wide-ranging reading, to much of which he had been introduced by Frank McEachran, just appointed to the modern languages department, and to talk with McEachran at their leisure. (See John Bridgen's "Frank McEachran 1900-1975, an Unrecognised Influence on W. H. Auden," in *W. H. Auden: "The Map of All my Youth"*). The freedom of the curriculum made it possible for the staff to educate the boys in the way

thought they knew cold, that I can't resist quoting a few such moments. "Neither mandarin disengagement nor dismayed withdrawal were particular features of Auden's writing for much of the 1930s, despite its occasional postures of detachment. Rather, its dominant mode might be described as the 'present imperative'." "Younger Auden was an intellectual opportunist who tended to inhabit and exhaust ideas." And—my favorite—"Subordination to the power of language was for Auden as much of a prerequisite for poetry as insubordination to temporal power; but it was equally necessary to know the differences between the two." Yet another appealing aspect of Sharpe's study is that, for all his modesty, he is quick to counter received or quasi-received ideas about Auden with his own strongly held—and in my eyes almost invariably spot-on attitudes, as when he expostulates, defending Auden's move to America, "as if it did not require some courage to uproot and start afresh." He also has a fine ability to pluck out of the vast storehouse of Audenalia insights and anecdotes that still feel fresh as flowers. Another favorite: "His sense of the difference between the two poets is perhaps illustrated by his remark that whereas Yeats never had mystical experiences he spoke about them all the time, and Eliot had them all the time but did not refer to them."

Sharpe's section "Poems Individually Considered" contains close readings of twenty poems (including longer sequences such as "In Time of War" and "Horae Canonicae"). In addition to more witty and wise one-liners—*The Orators* is "a kind of surrealist hand-book"; early Auden is "energetic and anarchic"; *The Age of Anxiety* has "uningratiating intentions"—Sharpe shows himself capable of keen observations about collections and poems alike, as when he remarks that "Two major elements recur in *Homage to Clio*, alongside its concern with history: silence and water." Particularly striking in this section, and a godsend for teachers, is Sharpe's paired discussions of several poems, among them "Musée des Beaux Arts" and "The Shield of Achilles" ("Connections or disconnections between observation and conscience are at the heart of these two poems"), and "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" and "The Sea and the Mirror" ("Each of these shows Auden's evolving debate with himself about the role of poetry in the modern world, through engagement with an illustrious precursor.") I am already planning future classes around the methods and insights of this superb section.

experts alike; will make the labors of readers, teachers and scholars more productive, rewarding, and – no mean feat – fun.

The opening paragraph of Sharpe's introduction gives a good sense of his lucid style and appealing humility: Auden, writes Sharpe,

is an important poet whose work has at various junctures challenged, intrigued, amazed, offended, gratified and disappointed his readership, sometimes by being cleverer than us, at others by seeming less serious than we suppose ourselves to be. His canon has been provokingly inconstant, flouting any notions of art's monumental fixity: he subjected poems to authorial revision or derision, even to complete suppression. Any critical summary of his career, therefore, risks offering a sedatively reasoned account of something that was in many aspects unshapely and unreasonable.

Sharpe's modesty is just one of his many winning features, but his study is far from "sedatively reasoned", offering instead lively and astute sections on Auden's "life and contexts", his whole collections and individual poems, and his critical heritage. Sharpe's intended reader, he notes, is "one either coming to grips with Auden for the first time, or refreshing an acquaintance that has staled (which does not, therefore, exclude the jaded scholar); and I hope that by the end of it such a reader will have found justification for an excitement with Auden's work, a way of formulating that interest, and the means of taking it further."

The first, "Life and Contexts" section is divided into sections and subsections: first, "Life" ("English Auden" and "Post-English Auden"); second, "The Literary Context"; and third, "The Historical Context" (comprising subsections on "Poetry and Politics", "Auden 'in Our Time'", "England, Their England", "An Age of Anxiety – and Auden's Response", and "Looking Beyond This Island: to Iceland, Spain, China and the USA"). Briskly but never cursorily, Sharpe discusses Auden's family, friendships and romantic relationships; travels; jobs; collaborations; influences; restlessness; revisions; and engagements with politics and religion, world events and knotty ideologies and ideas.

Sharpe is so consistently quotable, so pleasingly prone to sentences and sometimes mere phrases that open new windows onto aspects of Auden's life and work that "jaded scholars" might have

they wished, ranging freely round their subject. A man like McEachran, the model for Frank in Alan Bennett's *History Boys*, took full advantage of this freedom and included in his Modern History Lessons much English literature and especially English poetry of a highly individual kind.

Like many bright young men before and after him, Auden always seems to have been anti-establishment. At school he never appears to have held office of any kind except for being a member of the library committee, which Robert Medley reports him as greatly enjoying. Granted the political and intellectual climate encouraged by the school, the bright boys' intellectual muscle cannot have been unusual and Eccles, along with his staff, were obviously brave enough to allow them to have their head ("Nature rewards/ Perilous leaps").

It is not difficult to see how Auden's intellectual horizons were widened and his love of both literature and science was fostered by this unusual regime. In his *Auden*, Humphrey Carpenter records that Auden impressed Julian Huxley at interview for entrance to Christ Church by the ease with which he identified a bird's pelvis. The selectors are likely also to have observed the maturity and the breadth of the culture he had acquired, partly through the freedom that had been allowed him at school. Granted his strong and unusual personality Gresham's should take some credit for this and not least his Headmaster with whom in most ways he was obviously incompatible. In his autobiography Eccles summarised his teaching of Physics as follows,

In my Physics work I taught many things besides physics whilst I was at the job. I taught English, spelling, neatness, thoroughness, preciseness, tidiness, note-taking, honesty of work, honesty of thought, hard work and all the time religion, by having a high standard in everything.

Not all of those qualities that formed the core of Eccles's philosophy of education rubbed off on Auden, but the important ones seem to have, especially honesty of work, honesty of thought, hard work, and eventually, religion.

The staff and pupils at Gresham's when Auden was there were clearly engaged in a joint enterprise. The boys were not spoken down to and were trusted to an unusual extent. The result is plain to see in

the remarkable roll call of the school's old boys of great originality of thought and creativity from that time, not least in the life and work of Wystan Auden.¹

HUGH WRIGHT

Hugh Wright read Classics at Oxford University and taught Latin, Greek and Ancient History before becoming successively headmaster of three English independent schools including Gresham's, Holt. He did extensive research on Auden's time there as part of the Auden Centenary Year celebration.

Coal Face: Mining a Rich Seam

Commemoration. Commemoration. What does it mean? What does it mean? Not what does it mean to them, there, then. What does it mean to us, here, now? – *The Orators*

In September 2008, to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the GPO Film Unit, the British Film Institute released a beautifully packaged volume – the first of three – which includes *Coal Face* and a comprehensive collection of GPO productions from the brief period when Auden was active in the Unit.

My recent researches suggest that the first film on which Auden collaborated, and to which he contributed the madrigal “O lurcher-loving collier”, should be viewed not just as an experimental work but also as an explicit and elaborate act of commemoration, inspired by a particularly terrible Welsh colliery disaster which is now all but forgotten. After considering the evidence I hope *Newsletter* readers will agree that this film, regularly damned with faint praise or dispa-

¹ For their help, I am grateful to Tony Leech, a retired member of the Biology Department at Gresham's, Simon Kinder of the school's History Department, and Liz Larby, the school Archivist, and especially to John Smart, retired Head of English, who has shared my interest throughout and has made many valuable suggestions. A fuller and more detailed examination of Auden's life at Gresham's will be available from John Smart at Gresham's school in the Spring of 2009

room and lay down on an inflatable mattress, more than ready for sleep. (There was the alternative of climbing out of St John's and into my own college, Sidney Sussex: we had done that with Lindsay Anderson, leaving, as was the custom at St John's, through the bedroom window of some rucker players who surprisingly had no objection, and the over the wall of Sidney. Lindsay seemed to enjoy this. But I was very tired.)

Epilogue: Years later, probably after Auden's death, talking about this visit, I remarked that I was sure that I had not known at the time that he was homosexual. I guessed that none of my companions in 1957 had known either – but perhaps they thought it such common knowledge as not to be worth remark. Times really have changed. It was also only long afterwards that I came across Auden's remark, made during his time in Oxford, to Robin Maughan: “It's all fine, but where's the gravy? In America I won't open my mouth for less than three hundred dollars. In England I find that people expect me to speak for five pounds.” He had been generous with us.

PAUL MCQUAIL

Paul McQuail is a retired civil servant who enjoys living in London.

Book Review

Tony Sharpe, *W. H. Auden*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007.

Opening confession: when I first set eyes on Tony Sharpe's new critical study of Auden – part of the Routledge Guides to Literature series, and published last year – I was decidedly skeptical: how could a 150-page volume possibly shed useful new light on, spill revealing new ink about, or add substantive, necessary new pages to the vast body of criticism on my favorite poet? But wariness very quickly gave way to surprise and gratitude as I made my way through Sharpe's book. Another confession: I haven't seen any other volumes in this series, but if even a tiny number of them are remotely as good as Sharpe's (and I intend to find out), congratulations are in order to Routledge for its care and skill and in planning it.

For Sharpe's study – sensible, engaging, cogently structured and beautifully written – will be helpful to poetry novices and seasoned

Auden was notably good-humoured all day (he made only one complaint, mentioned below) and left himself entirely in our hands for the day. After the reading we walked to Newnham for a sherry party in Pat's room. (This time, even I could see that we ought to have taken a taxi: Auden was a heavy man and not light on his feet on dusty paths and on a day still very hot). The Newnham buildings and garden are delightful even in worse weather ("at once a distinguishing character of its own, novelty, a certain feminine daintiness, and an atmosphere almost of Pieter de Hooch" wrote Pevsner in 1954); Pat's room and the view from its balcony was among the best in the college; and everything went well, Auden plainly enjoying himself.

I had invited the handsomest couple I knew, Elizabeth Kirwan and Nicholas Monck, the latter's other qualification being his status as an editor-elect of *Granta*, (a Cambridge publication distinct from its modern namesake), to join Oswald, Pat and me for dinner with the poet. The only (mild, but justified) reproach that Auden offered was when I ordered a bottle of red wine and half a bottle of white for the six of us. Auden picked up the half bottle and remarked thoughtfully "This seems awfully small." I ordered more. After dinner Oswald had invited us to his rooms in St John's for a drink, also inviting someone I didn't know – Robert Loder. We then found that Auden didn't like whisky, only wine, but it turned out that Oswald had in his cupboard a bottle of white Chianti – something that hardly anybody else in Cambridge would have had at that time. Auden made himself comfortable by lying on the sofa, consulting Pat and Elizabeth to know if they objected to his taking his shoes off (they didn't). Auden took the lead in the conversation that followed from his curiosity about what was considered smart at Cambridge among novelists, poets, operas, opera singers, and films. We must have covered more topics than those, because we were still talking when it was time for the women to leave to be in their college before midnight. In fact we were still talking at half past one when Auden was ready to go to his room. He picked up his shoes and padded across the court, over the Bridge of Sighs to New Court, and up the two flights to his room. I waited in the doorway as he crossed the sitting room until he opened the bedroom door – only to stagger back at once, mouthing "There's somebody in there."

We had taken him, Peter and I, to the wrong guest-room. Fortunately, there was only one other guest-room in the building and that not hard to find, so we parted on good terms. I went back to Oswald's

raged as a technical failure, deserves and rewards closer analysis, recognition and appreciation.

So what should *Coal Face* mean to us, here, now?

2

Given Auden's well-documented childhood obsessions there could have been no more appropriate subject for his first contribution to the Unit – writing verse to accompany a short film, already in production, about Britain's mining industry. Five years later he would write, with disarming candour:

As a child I had no interest in poetry, but a passion for words, the longer the better, and appalled my aunts by talking like a professor of geology. Today words so affect me that a pornographic story, for example, excites me sexually more than a living person can do.

Besides words, I was interested almost exclusively in mines and their machinery. An interest in people did not begin until adolescence.²

Auden's obsessive interest in underground technologies was wide-ranging, penetrating and discriminating, a richly-detailed subterranean mindscape combining the imaginative and the staunchly pragmatic.

Auden clearly found the subject of this first foray into documentary both congenial and challenging. His main contribution to *Coal Face* is the madrigal, sung by a female chorus as the miners emerge from their night shift into daylight and disperse to their homes. It is a virtuoso piece, although arguably more effective as a text on the page than as a sung accompaniment (I'm sure I'm not alone in finding the sound of 1930s madrigal singing, then in vogue, quite excruciating). Auden may also have contributed his detailed knowledge of mining terminology to create the list of job titles chanted as a recitative by the male chorus during the underground sequences, although there's no evidence to support this claim. My own researches have depended on

² *The Prolific and the Devourer*. New York: Ecco, 1981, p. 10 (written in 1939).

Harry Tootle's Mining Dictionary, an invaluable online resource, but I assume that Auden knew many of the mining terms from his intensive boyhood reading of technical manuals and catalogues. Words, sung and spoken, count for much in this largely depersonalised underground world—they contend with the stark visual images and musical score to create a ramshackle, makeshift soundscape which, it can be argued, renders the aural textures of mining in a wholly innovative way.

Coal Face is not strictly speaking a GPO production, and was released under the name of EMPO, a brand coined by John Grierson and presumably a hybrid of the Empire Marketing Board and the GPO. The EMPO name was used for the Film Unit's more experimental material, which often involved the trial of new colour stock in such shorts as *The King's Stamp* and Len Lye's dazzling *A Colour Box*.³

Auden's documentary debut is usually described in film histories as an *avant-garde* or experimental work (the two terms are not synonymous). In fact this short film—running at around 11 minutes - is not, apart from a rapid montage sequence towards the end, particularly *avant-garde* in its visual treatment of mining, not least because many of its shots are recycled from earlier non-experimental films. There is nevertheless great innovation, particularly in Britten's brilliant score (anticipating Pierre Schaeffer's development of *musique concrète* in the late 1940s) and the euphoric montage as the miners rise to the surface after their shift.

The script consists of three often overlapping elements:

(1) A prose commentary, dominated by statistical data relating to regional coal fields, employment and production. This is delivered in the consistently serious cadences of the uncredited scriptwriter, Montagu Slater.

(2) The frequently inaudible choral litany of mining jobs chanted by the male chorus.

(3) Auden's madrigal, rather erratically sung by the female chorus, and intermittently inaudible on any print I have studied.

This inaudibility (the result of using the primitive Visatone-Marconi recording system) made me turn to the original text in the

³ Both these films, together with *Coal Face*, feature in the fine new BFI anthology *Addressing the Nation: The GPO Film Unit Collection*, Volume 1 (BFIVD758/E). Details of the current restoration project can be found at <http://www.bfi.org.uk/gpo.html>.

Cambridge, also taking Peter Hall, geographer, planner and storyteller, who had come up from London for the party. By the time we reached Newnham, the sun was up, though it was still an hour before the doors opened. (The Whittlesford party has no direct connection with Auden's visit, except that spending a night awake in a field is not a good preparation for taking the chair at a reading by a distinguished poet in a stuffy room during a heat wave.)

The Day of the Visit: We were to meet our guest from the Oxford train at 1:45. (I had asked Peter Hall to join me, Pat and Oswald otherwise engaged). Auden had asked us to identify ourselves by carrying a copy of his book *The Age of Anxiety*. Though his appearance was by no means as familiar as it later became, we had an American paperback with a small picture of him, dating from 1939 it seemed, and spotted him without difficulty. Auden, fifty that year, already had the weathered and deeply furrowed face that was to be so familiar in photographs for the rest of his life. His voice too was idiosyncratic: there were elements of an Oxford accent mingled with an American drawl. We took him to the guest room that Oswald had booked in New Court St John's College, known as the Wedding Cake. I have a feeling that we went by bus, rather than the taxi that would now be obvious—as it probably should have been then. The guest room was splendid, comfortable sofas and a view down the Backs in brilliant sunshine. We sat and talked for an hour in a relaxed way, much of it about films: Auden's most memorable remark, though we didn't know how to take it, was that the films he liked most were the ones where animals talk with human voices. He mentioned *Francis the Talking Mule* as an example, and one of us produced *Road to Utopia*.

Auden's next engagement was to listen to settings of some of his poems by a young man in Queens' College music room, the only cool place I came upon all day. Auden was pleased with the settings and afterwards the young man's parents took us to tea at the Blue Boar, from where we had only a few yards to go to the Union where the reading was to take place at five o'clock.

The Chamber of the Union Debating Society was packed, sweltering, sweaty. The readings were very well received and there was warm applause at the end. My own difficulty, in the chair, was to keep awake. I have no idea whether I succeeded and I expect I was nervous about asking anyone direct. The best I can say is that I don't remember Auden (or anyone else) telling me that I had visibly slept.

Auden's Visit to Cambridge, June 1957

The Cambridge English Club in 1956-57 existed to invite guest speakers, usually from outside Cambridge. They were not paid, though we offered to meet expenses. We didn't speculate at the time what made them accept, but it must have been some mixture of curiosity and goodwill towards the young. Members of the Club paid a subscription of seven shillings and sixpence for admission to the dozen or so talks during the year. Non-members could pay a shilling at the door for individual talks. For that year we had an attractive programme, including the highly publicised names of Colin Wilson and John Osborne; the well established Angus Wilson; the poet Kathleen Raine; critic and film director Lindsay Anderson and the celebrated critic William Empson. The climax of the programme was to be provided by W. H. Auden, who was spending the year in Oxford where he was Professor of Poetry. He had agreed to come—not to talk but to read his own poetry—on the Saturday afternoon at the end of May Week. The year's programme went reasonably well, though both John Osborne and Angus Wilson apologised and dropped out. Colin Wilson filled the largest lecture room and assured a financial if not intellectual success for the season.

The usual arrangement was for the Club's Committee members to entertain the guest speaker to dinner before the event, usually at Miller's restaurant, long vanished but then the best restaurant in town. I had been elected Chairman; the Secretary was Pat Milne-Henderson, the Treasurer Oswald Johnston, with two other committee members. We usually went afterwards for a drink with the guest if he or she wished.

May Week—a week in June of rowing and parties after the examinations were over—fell during a long heat wave that year. One of the last parties was arranged by a consortium of a dozen couples, each inviting about ten guests. Key features of the party were that it occurred in a field at Whittlesford (about seven miles from Cambridge) and that it was to go on all night. Few undergraduates had cars in those days; the first train to Cambridge in the morning would be at about seven; few people seemed to have come by bicycle, so there we were for the night. I had come with a friend, Leina de la Iglesia. By two or three a.m., talk and drink had been exhausted. Enterprising people started a fire, which at least kept up morale. Towards six, friends of Leina's who had a car offered us a lift back to

full score in the Britten-Pears archive in Aldeburgh, Suffolk. The full text (reproduced below in the transcript) supports my view that the film is an essentially commemorative act, and a eulogy for a specific group of dead miners. A prompt to this interpretation comes early in the film. After the introductory section of fifteen briskly explicatory shots of the surface workings of a mine, there is a series of animated maps showing the main coalfields of Britain. But there is a glaring—and therefore deliberate—omission: there is no mention of the Welsh coalfields around Wrexham in the North West, and more especially of the Gresford Colliery, one of the country's deepest. Yet in the mid-1930s everybody in the country had heard of the place and there can be no doubt that the original conception of the film, and its execution, were a direct result of terrible events in the town.

3

The name of Gresford is now little known, but one bleak autumn day in 1934 it dramatically became the focus of intense public interest that would continue for years to come.

At around 2 a.m. on Saturday September 22, during the night shift's meal break, there was a series of tremendous explosions deep below ground. In the subsequent inferno, 263 men and boys were burnt alive, gassed, asphyxiated or crushed to death. Others trapped with no means of escape were killed by later explosions and the release of more gas. Reports of the scene from a local newspaper, *The Wrexham Chronicle*, make for harrowing reading today: "As the pit cage wheels turned, the large crowds were scattered over the pit banks, and all over the colliery yard, and the highest bank was thick with silent men standing in the rain, waiting and watching. The saddest confirmation was soon available. The wheels of the winding shaft began their revolutions once more, and I saw two of the rescue party brought up—dead. There was a call for twenty volunteers, and 100 men stepped forward. Nobody spoke. The women stood quietly in the rain."

On the Sunday evening, all hope for any survivors abandoned, the grim decision was taken to seal the mine. The following Tuesday another explosion blew off the seal, claiming a final victim. It was a shambles, and the whole country was shocked into an outbreak of altruism. Donations large and small began to pour in and very soon over half a million pounds was raised—an enormous sum for the

time. Public indignation reached a peak on hearing that the dead miners had been docked a quarter day's pay because they hadn't completed their shift. Paul Robeson, no less, visited Wrexham to give a benefit concert for the bereaved.

There was a swift political response. The ensuing Public Enquiry was reported in every particular by the news media and interest continued unabated throughout 1935 (when *Coal Face* was in production) and continued after the publication of the Enquiry's findings in January 1936 (the film having been shown for the first time on 27 October 1935).

At the time *Coal Face* was commissioned, then, a particular mining disaster was the subject of constant analysis and discussion in parliament, in newspaper articles, leader columns, and wireless and newsreel reports. So when we encounter the chanted lines "[f]ire followed explosion" and "two hundred lamps missing" this is not simply a general allusion to the dangers of mining, but rather an explicit, poignant and – at the time – instantly recognisable reference to this recent event, still fresh in the audience's indignant memory.

Given this background, let's consider the film's commentary. The lines in square brackets do not appear in the final soundtrack but can be found in Britten's full score. In the credits, note that Auden, like key collaborators Alberto Cavalcanti, Harry Watt and Humphrey Jennings, gets no screen credit

COAL FACE

An EMPO Film
 Production John Grierson
 Edited by William Coldstream
 With music by Benjamin Britten
 Recording E. A. Pawley
 On Visatone-Marconi

Chorus: A sterile landscape covers the ore. There is the mine. There are the miners

(The film opens in darkness, accompanied by the opening bars of Britten's choral score. Fade up to a carefully-composed industrial landscape of paired winding-gears, chimneys and telegraph poles under billowing cumulus clouds.)

In contrast with the unpopulated and mechanised surface shots where all attention is on the apparatus of mining and the management of coal and waste, the underground sequences are densely populated and appropriately claustrophobic, with the miners increasingly foregrounded and differentiated bodies forced into ever tighter visual fields. The soundtrack too becomes increasingly dense and layered as, accompanied by a marching drum beat, the job titles are sung in an emphatically masculine, heroic manner, some voices struggling to be heard as the litany negotiates an aural bottleneck, as it were, before settling into a brief yet confident rhythm. What's interesting, given reports from the Gresford Enquiry (which established that responsibility for safety in the pit rested with preventative role of the firemen), is that this particular role is chanted *twice* – the first time with emphasis and the second time, as the last job in the list, declaimed by a single voice, with a perceptibly quavering and interrogative sound.

If *Coal Face* is a failure I suggest it is an honourable one. The unfinished aspect is, I suggest, a characteristic quality of many 1930s documentaries and very much part of their "all hands on deck" appeal. While representing a small part of Auden's brief career in film, this debut is a complex and multi-layered work with an explicit polemical and political content. It has remained culturally inaudible for too long. It can now be seen as an act of commemoration - about them, there, then which can - and which should - mean something to us, here, now.⁴

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⁴ Grateful thanks to the following for their help and support in the preparation of this article: Professor Edward Mendelson, Professor Annie Janowitz, Dr. Nick Clark and Jude Brimmer at the Britten-Pears Library, Nathalie Morris and Emma Furderer (BFI), Siobhan O'Leary (National Postal museum and Archive) Farnoosh Fathi, Anna Kenyon, Steph Knowles and Nick Lera.

Female chorus: Your lamp is out and all your cages still,
Course for her heart and do not miss,

Commentator: The life of the village depends on the pit.

Female chorus: For Sunday soon is past, and Kate fly not so fast,
For Monday comes when none may kiss,
Be marble to his soot and to his black be white.

(Pan right to left from chimneys to close up of tree moving gently in the breeze. Dissolve to shot of washing lines as miner walks away from camera. A series of dissolves and a pan left to right from slag heaps to a solitary wind-bent tree in open country. Another dissolve to a ruined building with motionless winding-gear behind. Dissolve back to the tree and pan up to an empty sky. A vertical wipe follows this pan, revealing a busy marshalling yard full of empty coal trucks)

Commentator: Transport and distribution double the price of coal.
(Sequence shows process of marshalling coal trucks into trains)

Making up coal trains. In this yard three thousand wagons are shunted every day. Points are moved electrically.
(Illustrative shots closely accompany the following list of the main uses of coal)

Forty million tons of coal are sold every year for household use.
Ten million tons for the production of electricity.
Twelve million tons for locomotives.
Fifteen million tons for shipping.
Fifty-four million tons are exported.
Eighty-five million tons for industry.

(Shots of winding-gear and other apparatus, and dissolves showing series of turning wheels. A solitary miner, looking into the camera, crosses from left to right, passing houses in the background. More shots of apparatus)

Coal mining is the basic industry of Britain.
(Fade to black)

*[Chorus: Served all great works of land and all great works on the sea
served not the living only then as now
but served the dead.]*

Chorus (triumphantly): There was a miner. There is the mine.

Commentator: Coal mining is the basic industry of Britain.

(Through a foreground of trees we see pithead winding-gears and a cluster of chimneys on the horizon. A steam engine passes right to left. A blow-up of this shot follows showing the pithead gear in more detail)

[The coal mines of Great Britain employ 774,000 men. Since the war foreign competition and loss of markets brought poverty to the miners. 200,000 men are unemployed.]

The coal mines of the country employ 750,000 men.

Headstocks, winding-gear, conveyer belts, washing sprays, shunting yards, slag heaps - this is the surface plant of every mine.

(Shots of a mountainous slag heap and overhead transporters)

Slag is the waste product of the pit. It must be separated from the coal. Overhead transporters deposit the slag on these heaps.

(Washing sprays and close-ups of grading apparatus)

At the pit head the coal is washed and graded.

The principle by-products of coal are: gas, coke, tar, dyes, oil, benzol.
(An animated map of Britain. As the commentator describes each of the coalfields the names of individual mines appear alongside a stylised graphic of a pit head)

The chief coal producing centres are in South Wales, Central Scotland, Durham and Northumberland, Yorkshire and Lancashire, and the Midlands. South Wales: 130,000 [140,000] men, 37 million tons a year. Central Scotland: 83,000 [86,000] men, 31 million tons. Durham and Northumberland: 146,000 [150,000] men, 46 million tons.

Chorus (under): A sterile landscape covers the ore. There is the mine. There are the miners.

Commentator: Yorkshire and Lancashire: 200,000 men, 56 million tons. The Midlands: 170,000 men, 50 million tons.

The night shift.

(Low angle shot of miners walking underground to their shift intercut with shots of pit ponies being led into dark tunnels)

Chorus (chanting): Headsman, barrowman, caster, changer, check-weigher, coupler, banksman, barrowman *(continues inaudibly under Commentator)*

Commentator: The coal face is a mile from the shaft.

Chorus (continues): Fireman, driver, greaser, master-wasteman, headsmen, hewer, peedee, rolley-way-man, peedee, trapper, fitter, skipper, running-fitter, wasteman, onsetter, overman, helper-up, inspector,

Foal!

Onsetter, overman, hewer, inspector,
Banksman, barrowman, carter, changer,
Flat-lad, driver...
Fireman.

(Miner removes shirt and begins to work. Close-ups of Davy lamps)

Commentator: Temperature often reaches 80 degrees. The Davy safety lamp. When gas is present a blue cap of flame appears around the lamp and warns the miner. The electric lamp gives a better light but no warning.

In this Scottish pit there is no gas. The miner can work with a naked flame.

(Two miners working at the coal face)

The seven and a half hour shift begins. The miner works in a cramped position. He has scarcely room to swing his pick. [Sometimes he must stand up to his knees in water.] He works along the seam, hewing out the coal. The average output is twenty-two hundredweight per shift. [His average output is twenty-five hundred-weights per shift]

Chorus (spoken): By coal is comprehended all the fossil fuels contained in the earth's crust. Anthracite, cannel, parrot, bituminous. Brown or lignite, caking, splint or hard, cherry or soft. Being an amorphous substance of variable composition. Coal!

1.30 a.m. The miner stops to eat.

(Two shirtless miners sit quietly eating)

1st Miner (voiceover): The coal's boiling out here today, Lew.

Lew (voiceover): Up at Dai Evans' place it's real stiff.

(Off screen a man whistles tunelessly. Close up of a thick sandwich wrapped in newspaper. Lew swigs slowly from a large bottle and consults a pocket watch. It is just after 2 a.m.)

In many pits machinery supplements hand labour.

(Shot of coal-cutting apparatus)

An electric coal-cutter. It moves along the seams undercutting the coal. The machine team shovel it into trucks.

Chorus (under): Higher percentage

Round coal obtained

Cost undercutting reduced

Output per man per shift increased

Length of face lessened.

(Sequence of shots showing use of the coal cutter)

Commentator: Every working day four [five] miners are killed and over 450 injured and maimed.

Chorus: Fire followed explosion. Five hundred men trapped half a mile underground two miles from pit-eye.

Commentator: Every year in Great Britain one in every five miners is injured.

Chorus: Rescue efforts abandoned. Cannot account for two hundred lamps.

Commentator: The shift is finished.

(Rapid montage of pithead winding-house, miners in cage ascending, accompanied by euphoric choral chanting.)

Chorus (tenor/bass (spoken)): How much did we hew? How much fined for dirt? How much do we get? Never mind that. We're going up!

Female chorus (soprano/alto): Bill! Ned! Sam! Geordie! Geordie! Tim! Ginger! Dave! George! Mike!

Chorus (tenor/bass (spoken)): But Dave's shot was late.

If all you soccer fans had by mistake any gumption

You'd play Northern Union like sensible buggers.

We're going up! Going up!

His pigeon clock was slow, his whippet won the cup.

Do any of you know there's anything else to talk about but sport?

Course there is, we're going up!

Up up up up up up up up up up!

Female chorus: O lurcher-loving collier, black as night,

Commentator: The miner's life is bound up with the pit.

Female chorus: Follow your love across the smokeless hill

(Exterior day. A long terrace of miners' houses. Shots of washing-lines, chimneys, winding-gear and slag heaps. Pan right to left from houses to a wind-bent tree in open country)

Commentator: The miner's house is often owned by the pit.