

The
W. H. Auden Society
Newsletter

Number 32 • July 2009

Contents

Katherine Bucknell: Edward Upward (1903-2009)	5
Nicholas Jenkins:	
Lost and Found . . . and Offered for Sale	14
Hugh Wright:	
W. H. Auden and the <i>Grasshopper</i> of 1955	16
David Collard:	
A New DVD in the G.P.O. Film Collection	18
Recent and Forthcoming Books and Events	24
Memberships and Subscriptions	26

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 will be the last to be distributed on paper to all members. 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 26 for the full table of fees. Further details may be found 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

Edward Upward (1903-2009)

By the time Edward Upward died on February 13, 2009, at age 105, even the author of one of his obituaries had preceded him to the grave by half a decade. His defiance of the passing years seems to have been a final articulation of the rebellious spirit with which Christopher Isherwood fell in love on first meeting “Chalmers” at Repton in 1921: “He was a natural anarchist, a born romantic revolutionary.”¹ Courteous and gently-spoken in person, Upward was made of steel. He never abandoned his communist ideals, though it cost him friends and, almost certainly, a greater literary reputation. This made him a moral beacon for his generation, for whether or not his friends and contemporaries agreed with his politics, none could deny his absolute sincerity and his willingness to sacrifice and to suffer for what he believed.

Auden and Upward were introduced by Christopher Isherwood in a Soho restaurant in 1927. Auden had already sent Upward some of his teenage poems. Auden cared for Upward’s opinion because he cared for Isherwood’s, and Isherwood cared for Upward’s. Since Upward was the oldest by a year, he occupied the highest position in this chain of gurus. Auden became a fan of Mortmere, the imaginary world which Upward and Isherwood created for one another in the early 1920s at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. At first Mortmere was only a game—a way of talking, a shared sense of humour and disgust, a love of the sinister, the gothic, the decadent and bizarre. Then Upward and Isherwood began to write stories about it, and they created a villageful of English eccentrics. The stories were funny, pornographic, and violent, with plots promoting anarchy and destruction. But the content of these youthful works is in one sense less important than the nature of the energy which fuelled them.

Upward was straight, but in adolescence his relationship with Isherwood was singular and intense. They spent as much time as they could alone together, and they talked and laughed non-stop, like a pair of lovers; all of their attraction for each other was sublimated into words. Isherwood later wrote of Chalmers that his very handwriting was, “peculiarly exciting—sharply pointed, vivid, impatient, with an

¹ Chalmers is the Upward character in Isherwood’s fictionalized autobiography, *Lions and Shadows: An Education in the Twenties*; see p. 18.

occasional romantic flourish.”¹ And Upward wrote of Alan Sebrill, the character representing himself in *The Spiral Ascent*, that merely to be with Richard Marple, the Isherwood character, was to be “in a state of elation”: “They walked in a rapture of imagery. And Alan thought that no other activity on earth—not even making love—could compare with this savouring of words.”² Such chemistry was irresistible to Auden, who thrived on literary collaboration and who was to write in a now famous diary passage: “Between two collaborators, whatever their sex, age, or appearance, there is always an erotic bond. . . . In my own case, collaboration has brought me greater erotic joy—as distinct from sexual pleasure—than any sexual relation I have had.”³

Auden borrowed a few details from Mortmere in his juvenilia. He read books Upward suggested to Isherwood, and one or two of his own literary discoveries circulated back the other way, into Mortmere. The Mortmere atmosphere survives in Auden’s early published work, especially *The Orators*, and he dedicated the Ode beginning “What siren zooming is sounding our coming” to Upward. Later, he several times read aloud to audiences from his copy of Upward’s 1928 story “The Railway Accident” (published in an expurgated version in 1949). When Upward became attracted to communism, Auden also relished this new excitement. In the summer of 1932, Upward let Auden read his diary, which enabled Auden to project the voice of a communist in “A Communist to Others,” written that August. He did this so convincingly that some readers evidently presumed he himself was joining up.

But in this episode of identification, the differences between them began to emerge clearly. For Auden, adopting a communist posture was an act of the imagination; for Upward, it was a long-term, real-life commitment. In 1934, after attending cell meetings for two years, he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain; he was to remain a member until 1948. And he left only because he felt the party itself had abandoned orthodoxy and become revisionist. It was not until after Stalin’s death, when Khrushchev began to reveal the crimes of

¹ *Lions and Shadows*, 45.

² Pp. 10-11.

³ In his 1964 Berlin diary, quoted by Edward Mendelson in *Later Auden*, 471-472.

his predecessor, that Upward realized earlier reports in the Western press had been true. Before that he assumed they were propaganda disseminated by Western governments.

In 1938, Upward published *Journey to the Border*, an autobiographical novella about the disillusionment with contemporary society which leads a young middle-class tutor to suicidal despair; he is saved only by deciding to join the workers' movement. The visionary intensity of the tutor's experience and his dreamlike, shifting perceptions of various monstrous social types made Upward's reputation, but the story of abject and permanent conversion to Marxism-Leninism seemed to be the only one he was then prepared to tell. In *The Spiral Ascent*, he describes how a philosophical crisis had begun earlier for him in a Cambridge lecture hall when he heard I.A. Richards argue that literature, because it deals in emotion, has no connection to reality. Richards's views, combined with Auden's dismissal of his verses, had already stopped Upward writing poetry. His search for a connection between his imagination and the real world ended in the early 1930s when he read Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, which reassured him that literature *could* reflect material reality. And in his notorious 1937 essay "Sketch for a Marxist Interpretation of Literature" he put forward his doctrinaire conviction that a writer cannot do his best work unless he is actively committed to the class struggle; he "must first of all become a socialist in his practical life, must go over to the progressive side of the class conflict."¹ But even with this new foundation, he wrote—or at least finished—very little in the thirties and almost nothing in the forties and fifties; he was overwhelmed by party work, family life (he married Hilda Percival in 1936 and had a son and a daughter), and the need to earn money. From 1931 to 1961, he taught at Alleyn's School in Dulwich, where he became a housemaster and head of English.

But it was more than this. His juvenilia and early work reveal that Upward had the sort of mind for which normal, everyday appearances could quickly turn strange and threatening. In one late story he casts himself as a painter, and he puts the following words into the mouth of a character representing his literary hero, E.M.Forster: "You were called a surrealist by some critics at the time,

¹ In *The Mind in Chains: Socialism and the Cultural Revolution*, ed. C. Day-Lewis, p. 52.

but I think this was a complete misnomer. You were essentially a representationalist, and nothing physically impossible or even improbable was depicted in any of your paintings.”¹ If he was representing reality as it seemed to him, why did his work seem surreal to others? Evidently, he was working dangerously close to the edge of his own sanity. In 1958, Isherwood observed in his diary, “Paranoia is a kind of heightened awareness which makes one see how extraordinarily sinister ordinary life is—or can seem if one wishes. What else but this were Edward and I cultivating at Cambridge when we invented Mortmere?”² And Upward later suggested that Virginia Woolf agreed to publish *Journey to the Border* because the tutor’s mental state was familiar to her: “Perhaps the ‘madness’ of its central character influenced her in its favour, she herself having experienced delusions in real life.”³ Upward was highly strung and his mental health was fragile. He had a brother who went permanently insane and was institutionalized. His seventy-odd volumes of diaries, now in the British Library, will perhaps tell more about the psychological pressures which contributed to his abandoning his early fantastic style for the plain one of his later work.

Isherwood cultivated many close friendships with neurotic, edgy figures. His diaries record several love affairs with attractive, troubled boys, some of whom wound up institutionalized—despite and not because of his interest in them. The central relationship of Isherwood’s life—with the American painter, Don Bachardy—featured, as with Upward, a brother who was officially crazy. Ted Bachardy, a manic-depressive schizophrenic, drew Isherwood’s eye even before Don did. Isherwood was more emotionally poised and controlled than both Upward and Auden. Indeed, madness was a thrilling antidote to his fastidious, extreme sanity. In a 1949 letter, he thanked Upward for “having helped me to acquire the play instinct early, with Mortmere”; it enabled the rational Isherwood to recognise “the glee, the insane Mortmere-anarchic element in all experience, however ghastly.”⁴ Like Upward, he employed them in his work to

¹ “The Procession” in *The Nightwalk and Other Stories* (1987), p. 15.

² June 5; in *Diaries: Volume One, 1939-1960*, p. 756.

³ *Christopher Isherwood*, Enitharmon Press (1996), p. 20.

⁴ ALS, Upward papers, British Library.

destabilize established norms, but in Isherwood's case the political cause proved to be gay liberation rather than the class struggle, and the mode was comic.

Don Bachardy, sensitized by the torment of his brother's condition, was alarmed by just how precarious Upward's sanity continued to be in later years. In 1974, Upward sent Isherwood a recording of himself reading aloud from *Alan Sebrill*, as he then titled the third volume of his trilogy. Isherwood wrote in his diary:

Don has listened to Edward's tape of *Alan Sebrill* and thinks that Edward is very near to madness. I think he lives very near to madness and perhaps always has; but I don't expect him to cross the line now. I believe that danger is over.¹

Upward writes movingly in *The Spiral Ascent* of how difficult Alan Sebrill found it to sustain any belief in his literary imagination once Richard Marple's companionship was no longer constantly available to him. Like the tutor in *Journey to the Border*, Sebrill even considered suicide. Upward himself weathered writer's block and a nervous breakdown to produce the first volumes of the trilogy, *In the Thirties* (1962) and *The Rotten Elements* (1969). When Isherwood saw him in London in 1970, he observed in his diary the physical cost of Upward's determination to go on writing: "He seems fatter and speaks with half-closed eyes, sometime sleepily, sometimes excitedly and inaudibly." Nor had the writer's block altogether gone. Unlike the 1930s, Upward was now writing in opposition to the political climate of the time, and this increased the mental strain:

He says he is having just as great difficulty with this volume as with the others. . . . To me he seems to have fears of rejection by publishers on political grounds and fears of persecution on grounds of libel which verge on paranoia. Perhaps this is the result of the kind of life he has led — always feeling himself to be an illegal underground worker. But without this life, Edward wouldn't now have his own personal myth; and lacking that, he'd write quite differently or not at all.

¹ October 14, 1974. When it was published, the third volume of the trilogy was titled *No Home But the Struggle*.

And the block later returned again, along with attacks of vertigo.¹ Yet Upward forged on, well into his nineties, with prose pieces and stories, producing four more volumes of short fiction.

He lamented the dwindling of his friendship with Auden, with whom he never met nor even exchanged a letter after Auden emigrated, and he felt hurt when Auden removed the dedication to him of the Ode in *The Orators*.² Edward Mendelson's hunch is that Auden did this because Upward criticised Isherwood for becoming a pacifist and taking up Vedanta. The 1939 letter containing Upward's attack is lost, but Isherwood replied, explaining his new position, and Upward immediately wrote again, charitably agreeing to disagree. Their correspondence was then interrupted for more than six years, and Upward later recalled – perhaps sentimentally – that this was because of the war.³ Nevertheless, Isherwood and Upward remained permanently close, sending each other their work in progress for comment and meeting nearly every time Isherwood was in England.

But it is also true that Isherwood feared Upward's skepticism. The depth of this fear became clear when Isherwood was writing his last book, *My Guru and His Disciple*, and found he could not summarise his religious beliefs for the conclusion. In his diary he wrote:

What is holding me up? . . . surely I can make *some* statement?

This block which I feel is actually challenging, fascinating. It must have a reason, it must be telling me something.

Am I perhaps inhibited by a sense of the mocking agnostics all around me – ranging from asses like [John] Lehmann to intelligent bigots like Edward? Yes, of course I am. In a sense, they are my most important audience. Everything I write is

¹ Isherwood reports these in his diary entry for August 31, 1978, where he also tells that Upward's son, called Christopher after him, has been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, "too cruel to bear thinking about."

² The dedication was dropped in *Collected Poems* (1945) and subsequent collections, but it reappeared in the 1966 edition of *The Orators*.

³ See Peter Parker, *Isherwood* (2004), pp. 445-446 and *Christopher Isherwood*, p. 10. Upward's second letter is also lost.

written with a consciousness of the opposition and in answer to its prejudices. . . . I must state my beliefs and be quite intransigent about them. I must also state my doubts, but without exaggerating them. . . .¹

Negotiating his feelings about his old friend helped Isherwood push through his own, uncharacteristic writer's block to "come out" as a devout Hindu. In fact, his initiation into Vedanta had been no more mystical or irrational than Upward's conversion to communism or Auden's return to the Anglican church. Moreover, it is easy to see why a political ideology which aims to bring about its heaven on earth and within time would have been more objectionable to Auden than any belief held privately. Certainly, the harsh attitude toward Upward which may have caused him to drop the dedication probably reflects Auden's anxieties about his own religious beliefs and what Upward might have said about them more than it reflects any concern for Isherwood. After all, Auden himself sometimes tormented Isherwood over his devotion to Swami Prabhavananda.

Upward wrote after Auden's death that Auden appeared in his dreams "more often than anyone else alive or dead." This should have "made me aware how much I still loved him as a poet." But he could not overcome his disappointment with Auden's liberal politics and his perceived support for the Vietnam war. "I ought to have recognised that my indignation was less against the injuriousness of his opinions than against him for holding them. I could not dissociate him from himself as the young poet who for me and for other poets of his generation had been the only potential giant among us." Upward objected to Auden's "remaining a poet for whom art was essentially a supreme game."² As the narrator in Upward's "The Procession" says, "Some art critics may think that art needn't tell the truth about any reality outside itself, but I think that if it doesn't it becomes fraudulent not just morally but also as art." And this earnestly held opinion—based on his Leninist materialism—was one of the things that made it so difficult for Upward to write. It was a heavy load for the imagination to lift.

¹ Oct. 23, 1977.

² "The Poet Who Died" in *The Night Walk*, pp. 49-50.

When Isherwood listened to the tape recording of Upward reading *Alan Sebrill*, he wrote:

What is wonderful about his style is his reticence. He tells you everything in his own time. He isn't one bit worried about your possibly getting impatient. His deliberation is remorseless. He builds the structure of matchsticks with maddening patience. But it gets built, and what's more, the matchsticks are magnetic. They can't be blown over – no, not by a hurricane. They are locked together.

Isherwood sensed within this unassailable structure the same excitement to which he had responded in youth, but now ruthlessly controlled:

And then there is the tremendous, rigidly repressed excitement of the *mental journey*. Edward, in this Victorian drawing room in Sandown, is setting forth into the outer space of his own mind.¹

Upward made it a condition of being a writer that he would write about the class struggle, and anyone who wants to know what life was like in the British Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s needs to read *The Spiral Ascent*. But his true subject was his own individual relationship to that struggle. *The Spiral Ascent* is a spiritual autobiography which testifies to a life in the party and to Upward's communist faith as some earlier English texts testify to Christian faith. It does not set out to entertain, but rather to edify and perhaps to inspire. Upward's reticence, as Isherwood describes it, guarantees his moral trustworthiness and his faithfulness to emotional truth.

Among his models are Langland, Bunyan, Defoe, Cowper, W. Hale White, Robert Tressell, Gissing. Some are dissenters, others atheists, struggling with political disillusionment or spiritual crisis. They are mostly plain stylists, as he became, focused on content rather than rhetoric. His model for *No Home But the Struggle*, the last, most personally revealing volume of his trilogy, is Wordsworth. In *The Prelude*, Upward found both justification for taking himself and

¹ October 11, 1974.

his political disillusionment as his main subject and also support for “rejecting the established style of my time and trying to write simply.”¹ He wished to rebel against the over-sophistication of his Modernist predecessors. Even in the novels of his Modernist hero, Forster, what Upward singled out to admire was Forster’s technique of understatement, which he said was “based upon the tea-table: instead of trying to screw all his scenes up to the highest possible pitch, he tones them down. . . .”² An ordinary style suited the ordinary life he was determined to live. He had a horror of specialness and of privilege, which, as he reveals in *No Home But the Struggle*, began in childhood, and which drove him much of his life, perhaps perversely, to avoid conventional success or celebrity.

The Prelude also suggested to Upward the narrative strategy of moving backwards and forwards in time in order to make more evident the excitement of his inner journey. The best of his early work has a linear trajectory, building tension towards a single moment of insight or conversion; *The Spiral Ascent* revisits the moments of both vision and disillusion again and again, revealing their changing and complex meaning in relation to one another and more accurately reflecting the nature of real emotional experience. The last volume of the trilogy, spiralling between past self and present self, bourgeois self and Marxist self, reveals the dialectical evolution of Upward’s political and poetic convictions and gives new meaning to the first two volumes. It also shows how Upward, despite unceasing adversity, continually renewed his commitment to social revolution and to writing.

His late short story “At the Ferry Inn” (1985) imagines a longed-for reconciliation with Auden, and it imagines something Upward may have longed for even more, a discussion with Auden of Upward’s trilogy *The Spiral Ascent*. There is no evidence that Auden ever read it. Nevertheless, in Upward’s story, the Auden character admires a passage in which “your central character realises how wrong he has been to trust the word of politicians rather than of honest imaginative writers” (131); but the Upward character is taken aback by such an assumption that he has abandoned his leftist views. And

¹ ALS to K.B. 12 Dec. 1987.

² *Lions and Shadows*, 173-174.

so, at this meeting which never in fact took place, the friends fall out all over again.

KATHERINE BUCKNELL

Passages from Christopher Isherwood's diaries are published by permission of Don Bachardy. Diaries: Volume Two, The Sixties (1960-1969) will appear in the summer of 2010, edited and introduced by Katherine Bucknell. Her third novel, What You Will, appeared in paperback last year.

Lost and Found . . . and Offered for Sale

In "Lost and Found", in the *W. H. Auden Society Newsletter*, 5 (August 1990) [http://audensociety.org/05newsletter.html#P8_1008], it was reported that, according to the *New York Post*, one Ed Cachianes, the then-tenant of Auden's apartment at 77 St Marks Place in New York, had recently discovered a small cache of Auden-related material during some domestic redecoration. Following the *Post's* description, the *Newsletter* asserted that the trove included "a driver's license, some 'handwritten pages of poetry,' and the playbill for a Polish ballet performed at the University of Michigan on which Auden made some rib-digging notes: 'his soulful expression is just a bit unfortunate because he has buck teeth. . . The piano is impossible. . . . He has a strange idea of bel canto. If he sings "I love life" I shall leave.'"

No more was known of this matter until March 2009 when the items which the *New York Post* and the *Newsletter* had described in 1990 were put up for sale as three lots on eBay by an individual trading under the name of "patkeeny" in Tannersville, New York. This was an unusual offer for a seller whose inventory of typical wares available at the online auction house appears to consist mainly of domestic furnishings such as lamps, carpets and picture frames. But s/he explained in the eBay listings for the Auden items that "I was the tenant at 77 St. Marks Place directly following Auden and these items were among his many famously discarded belongings after the time of his death." The wording suggests a number of possibilities, such as that Edward Cachianes (there are two listings for that name in the Tannersville telephone directory) and "patkeeny" are one and

the same person, or that “patkeeny” was selling these items on behalf of local resident Edward Cachianes.

The sale on the Auden items ended on 23 March 2009 but images posted on the eBay site (still available for review, as of this writing, by those who are registered eBay users and who log in before searching) offer some more details about the nature of the Auden ephemera in question.

Lot 1, listed on eBay as “VERY RARE Authentic W. H. AUDEN Hand Written Poem” and described as a “1) hand written poem on two sides of a sheet of paper notated A and B. 2) A paper fragment—one third the original sheet size notated R and S”, is in fact a set of pencilled drafts of the alphabetically-arranged index of first lines in Auden’s anthology *The Faber Book of Modern American Verse*. The highest bid on this lot was \$214.49 and the item was withdrawn from sale because the reserve price was not met.

Lot 2, listed as “Authentic W. H. AUDEN Hand Written Polish Ballet Notes”, is described as “1) a Polish Ballet and Opera program upon which W. H. Auden has written notes. 2) an index card with notes.” The quality of the relevant photograph on eBay makes it difficult to discern with certainty when the “Polish Ballet” was presented at the University of Michigan but it appears to have been on 16 February 1942. The images of this item are good enough to establish conclusively that none of the remarks scribbled on the program, including those about “buck teeth” and “bel canto”, is in Auden’s handwriting. However, a few of the words written on the associated index card are in Auden’s hand, and are inscribed in the Mediterranean-blue ink which he used in his fountain pen in the early 1950s. The highest bid on this lot was \$99 and the items were withdrawn from sale because the reserve price was not met.

Lot 3, listed as “Authentic W. H. AUDEN Drivers License—WOW”, is described as “W. H. Auden’s signed Drivers License. The photos accurately show the condition - Very Good - a bit dirty, little creasing.” The license, issued by the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles, apparently in December 1968, and with an expiry date of 31 December 1971, describes Auden as being 5 ft, 11 inches in height, having “HA[zel]” eyes and needing to wear “CORRECTIVE LENSES”. (These were the same height and eye colouration that Auden had used to describe himself in “Letter to Lord Byron” more than 30 years earlier.) The driver’s license was the highest-priced, and apparently the most sought-after, of the three Auden lots offered by

“patkeeny.” Bidders made nine offers, the largest being \$374, but, like the bids on the other two Auden lots, this price also failed to meet the seller’s reserve and the item was withdrawn from sale.

Given the nature of the market for archival materials associated with important writers, it seems very likely that, although they failed to sell, these scraps have not vanished forever and that they will be offered once more for sale online or (just possibly) offline in the not-very-distant future. Auden’s dirty laundry has not yet been put on sale in the public square, but now, amongst other things, his license, “a bit dirty”, has. It probably will be again. And again.

NICHOLAS JENKINS

W. H. Auden and the *Grasshopper* of 1955

Geoffrey Howes, an enterprising sixth former at Gresham’s School, Holt, decided to celebrate the school’s quatercentenary by asking a number of distinguished Old Boys in the field of literature and the arts to write for a special edition of the school’s literary magazine, the *Grasshopper*. He netted some very big fish indeed, one assumes for no fee, as only youthful editors can; and Auden was perhaps the biggest. It was produced in the summer term of 1955, presumably for Speech Day in June and was duly praised in *The Gresham* that came out soon afterwards.

In his article on Gresham’s in Stephen Spender’s *W. H. Auden: A Tribute* (1975), Robert Medley, the artist and Auden’s great friend from their school days, refers to a conversation he and Auden had about the 1955 edition of the *Grasshopper* at that time. Instead of writing an article for the magazine Auden had devised a questionnaire for it where the reader was invited to supply answers for himself. Auden supplied his own answers under the title “*Qui e l’uom felice?*”. The questionnaire had asked for the definition of the reader’s Eden, that is, what it would take to make the reader ideally happy, giving his own answer with a title in Italian, the ideal language to his mind at that time. In reference to his conversation with Auden about the questionnaire, Medley recalls, “He told me at the time that he thought he had solved the problem rather neatly and he considered it was the only valuable advice he could give to Greshamians.”

The genesis of idea for the questionnaire seems to have been in Auden's "Vespers", published in "Horae Canonicae" the year before. There he introduces a similarly witty and revealing series of five contrasts between his Eden and another's New Jerusalem. Auden was obviously pleased with this idea because he quoted half of his answers from the *Grasshopper* questionnaire in the prologue of *The Dyer's Hand*, a collection of his prose writing published eight years afterwards in 1963. In the section of the prologue entitled "Reading", he makes the point that a writer's dream of Eden is his own business if he writes poetry or fiction, but if he writes literary criticism, he says, honesty demands that he articulate that vision to his readers, that they be invited to judge his own judgments. He adds, "Accordingly I must now give my answers to a questionnaire I once made up which provides the kind of information I should like myself when reading other critics." Without further commentary, Auden made only a few significant changes to the original questionnaire of which he reprinted the first half. It is hard to believe he expected any critic to follow his advice but clearly he felt his answers revealed something important about himself. They were expressed wittily, for example:

In your Eden, what is its climate?

British

Form of government?

absolute monarchy elected for life by lot

Education system?

segregated boarding schools run by wild eccentrics

Sports?

a) In the winter terms, sheep dog trials, wrestling

b) in the summer terms, swimming, croquet

The last two were omitted from the 1963 version. He added instead: "Public statues? - *confined to famous defunct chefs*" and changed the ideal language from Italian to "*one of mixed origins like English, but highly inflected*". As so often with his poems he here later had second thoughts, adding, discarding, altering as his ideas changed, in this case presumably with his readership in mind, taking out the schools and sports he had included in 1955 for Gresham's and affirming his love of English or something like it.

The playful *Grasshopper* questionnaire is also a good illustration of one of Auden's favorite teaching techniques which, as his former pupils at Downs School, Colwall in the 1930s vividly recall, he frequently used. It gives us a better idea of the manner in which Auden cultivated an approach to teaching that included such amusements, and made points obliquely and memorably rather than use more orthodox methods of instruction. His questionnaire published in the *Grasshopper* and his own answers to it were a form of advice and an act of self-revelation to his readers at the school then.

To celebrate his Centenary in July 2007, Gresham's reprinted a 1955 edition of the *Grasshopper* that had become very rare. Other than Auden's it contained pieces by Benjamin Britten, Lord Reith, Stephen Spender, John Hayward and other distinguished Old Greshamian literary figures. Copies of Auden's contribution to it can be obtained free of charge from The Old Greshamian Club, Gresham's School, Holt NR25 6EA, or by email from ogclub@greshams.com. I am grateful to Edward Mendelson for his help with the production of the facsimile, to John Smart of Gresham's School and to John Fuller for their comments on the first draft of this introduction.

HUGH WRIGHT

A New DVD Release in the G.P.O. Film Collection

We Live in Two Worlds: The G.P.O. Film Unit Collection, Volume Two 1936-1938 (BFIVD759)

New roads, new rails, new contacts, as we know
From documentaries by the G.P.O.

(Letter to Lord Byron, Part 1)

For the first time since the 1930s a wide selection of these General Post Office Film Unit documentaries is now available to a general audience thanks to the diligence of the British Film Institute and the British Postal Museum and Archive.¹ The latest volume is of great interest to Audenites, and not only for those few films on which the

¹ For details, see www.bfi.com and www.postalheritage.org.uk.

poet actively collaborated during his six months' employment by the G.P.O. Film Unit. For what we have here is an indispensable visual and aural field guide to the mid-1930s, with many of its social, cultural and political concerns clearly and stylishly articulated.

An added frisson lies in the fact that the "low, dishonest decade" has never seemed closer to us than it does today, with emerging recession, depression, political turmoil, vast social inequalities and economic mismanagement (and we even have, in Bernard Madoff, a modern-day Stavisky, the fraudster whose story Auden and MacNeice bequeathed as a plot to Alfred Hitchcock "with sincerest praise of *Sabotage*"). Anyone seeing these G.P.O. Film Unit productions in quantity is invariably won over by the exuberant range of creative talent on display, by the twin hallmarks of humour and humanity, and by their ambitious reach and progressive values.

This second volume covers Unit productions from 1936 to 1938 and maintains the high standard established by Volume One (which included *Coal Face*). The gatefold sleeve is lavishly illustrated with glowing contemporary graphics (another great achievement of the period) and a substantial booklet combines illuminating essays and synopses by over twenty critics, biographies and a revealing interview with producer Alberto Cavalcanti.

The critic Gilbert Adair once observed that Auden's 1930s verse is written "in black and white" and while that poetry still strikes us today as essentially modern, films of the thirties tend to be seen as exercises in nostalgia. Thus we refer casually to "old films" of the period but never to "old poetry" or "old novels." It can take some effort on the part of the modern viewer to recognise that, seventy years ago, these short films were *startlingly* new – cutting-edge visual and aural expressions of the greatest communications revolution in history. What appears quaint to us – the bakelite telephones, the bundled cables, the punched tape and teleprinters – were at the time as modishly modern as any Blackberry or i-Pod.

We Live in Two Worlds takes its overall title from a 1937 "film talk" about Switzerland by J.B. Priestley, and this film is illustrative of the Unit's approach to documentary. It's an opportunistic low-budget recycling of available footage, shrewdly cut to support Priestley's thesis, which concerns "the quarrelsome national world" of "frontiers and passports and customs houses and armies" – all familiar Auden themes. In a homespun and informal monologue, Priestley contrasts images of pastoral continuity with the new age of hydroelectric

power and telecommunications, which serve to transcend national boundaries and, it is optimistically asserted, will lead to an increasingly open, democratically inclusive and ultimately better society. Director Cavalcanti manipulates the soundtrack to surprising effect, adding echoes, repetitions and the odd yodelling whoop to create a rich aural depth. Combine this with a wonderful score by Maurice Jaubert (the G.P.O. employed a spectacular cohort of composers in addition to the young Benjamin Britten) and sundry *avant-garde* techniques and you have a powerful example of progressive 1930s film-making wrought into a simple message for a mass audience. All this in ten minutes.

What strikes one repeatedly during viewings of these films is how much in step they are with Auden's poetic practice at the time (or, to turn the tables, how tuned-in Auden was with the social and cultural priorities of the age). What consistently impresses is the astonishing creativity of Auden's colleagues in the Unit, and the remarkably consistent ethical assumptions shared by the collaborators. Many of these films sound as if they could in fact have been written by Auden, had he been a journeyman scriptwriter working on a long-term contract. It corrects the idea that Auden, the great young poet, was intellectually slumming within the Unit. He was in fact working closely with some of the most original and creative minds of the time, and it should come as no surprise that there are numerous echoes of Auden's writings in these films, and of these films in Auden's writing. The most obvious being the multiple "in-jokes" featuring his colleagues in *Letter to William Coldstream, Esq.* in *Letters from Iceland*:

Very well then, let's start with perceiving
Let me pretend that I'm the impersonal eye of the camera
Sent out by God to shoot on location
And we'll look at the rushes together.

God in this case could well be an ironic reference to "the Chief", John Grierson, and Audenites will enjoy the opportunity to link the film makers showcased in this new anthology with the (misspelled) list of names which crop up in Auden's poem—Stuart Legg, Ian McNaughton, Basil Wright and, of course, "the Chief" himself. It is Grierson who remains a sticking point for some critics. Here, for instance, is film historian David Thomson on the Unit's founder:

[He] was a harsh, restrictive enthusiast. Although he proclaimed a yearning to liberate and extend filmmaking, he evolved a narrow doctrine hostile to many other types of cinema, essentially bigoted and unintelligent and isolated from history. (*A Biographical Dictionary of Film*, 1975)

Thomson is more than half right. Grierson was combative, doctrinaire, aloof and memorably described (by a supporter) as having “a well-disguised sense of humour”.

Thanks to this anthology we can at last place Auden’s most celebrated contribution to documentary, *Night Mail*, within its filmic context, and what comes as a bracing revelation is that this much-loved work is a mere fragment of the G.P.O.’s output, and not necessarily the most interesting. The remarkable range of approaches within the Unit spans the didactic, the celebratory, the dramatic, and the comic, from grimly realistic social reportage to dazzling abstract animations. *Night Mail* hardly needs further introduction and is here showcased in a sharp digitalised print typical of the high quality restoration of all the films in the collection. It’s quite easy to picture Auden, in the course of a day’s work at Soho Square, dropping into the tiny screening room to see rushes of works then in production and swapping notes with directors, editors, cutters and sound men. Thanks to the recent discovery of typescript and manuscript versions of subtitles for Dziga Vertov’s *Three Songs of Lenin* (1935) we now have a much clearer idea of Auden’s high level of technical engagement with film.

Of particular interest will be the long-unseen Britten/Auden collaboration *Negroes*, released as *God’s Chillun* in 1938, which marked an ambitious early attempt to engage with the complex cultural legacy of slavery in the West Indies. The original project – with an elaborately scored commentary building on the earlier innovations of *Coal Face* – was abandoned (Grierson, according to Britten, stated that the work to date was ‘too flippant’) and a truncated composite film, nervously fronted by the cricketer George Copeland Grant, was later cobbled together, retaining only fragments of Auden’s lengthy poetic commentary and Britten’s score. Film historian Rachel Low describes the result as ‘a freakish little film’ and it’s certainly a very odd work indeed, combining an historical account of slavery (delivered by mostly African voices) and anodyne criticism of the economic and

social consequences –“most of the land is still in the hands of Europeans.”

The film culminates in some fine brief verses Auden would thrif-
tily recycle in *The Ascent of F6*:

Acts of injustice done
Between the setting and the rising sun
In history lie like bones, each one.

But between the day and night
The choice is free to all; and light
Falls equally on black and white.

Sadly, what could have been the most richly inventive and original of all the Auden/Britten collaborations was never fully achieved. The powerful lyricism alone may have been enough to prompt the cautious Grierson into cancelling the project, although the more practical issues of a lack of appropriate visual images and a spiraling budget prevented completion of the film as intended by its makers. It remains a tantalizing might-have-been. *Coal Face*, *Night Mail*, *Negroes* and 1935's delightful travelogue *Beside the Seaside* (directed by Marion Grierson) together constitute the main body of Auden's G.P.O. work—less than an hour's worth of film in all. But his presence can be felt in many other productions, sometimes in surprising ways.

Auden's friend and flatmate, the painter William Coldstream, was also a member of the Unit (initially working as an editor on *Coal Face*). He also directed *The Fairy of the Phone* (1936), included here, an elaborate and whimsical musical about etiquette for the novice telephone user (or 'Distant Subscriber') of the time. Of passing interest is that the main character in the film is a Wodehousian bachelor named Otto Parsnip, whose surname was later given by Evelyn Waugh to the turncoat working-class poet based on Auden in *Put Out More Flags* (with Isherwood as his companion, Pimpernel). Parsnip is tutored by the eponymous Fairy on how to manage his calls promptly and courteously, and appears in turn as a Mayfair flat-dweller, attentive nephew, housemaid and couturier. What strikes a modern audience is the high camp approach to the subject—a sensibility Coldstream and Auden clearly shared and which remains fresh and funny.

There are countless highlights, but I'd single out four: Norman McLaren's *Love on the Wing* (1938), a spirited, free-wheeling animation which was at the time banned by the Postmaster General for being "too Freudian." By way of contrast there's Harry Watt's influential *North Sea* (1938), a serious, grittily realistic depiction of events aboard a capsizing trawler and the mobilisation (thanks to the Post Office) of heroic rescue services. There's also *Penny Journey* (1938), a minor early work by the greatest of all wartime documentary makers, Humphrey Jennings (who, incidentally, had made his print debut alongside Auden in *Public School Verse of 1924*). Finally, there is Auden's fleeting appearance on screen in Evelyn Spice's *Calendar of the Year* (1936) as a rather sinister department store Father Christmas briskly interrogating a bob-haired little girl:

AUDEN: What would *you* like for Christmas?

GIRL: Er. . . a doll's house.

AUDEN: What would you like *inside* it?

Now that most of Auden's G.P.O. films are easily accessible (along with Strand Films' *The Way to the Sea*, which appears as an extra on the BFI's separate edition of *Night Mail*) it may seem churlish to complain that this is still not enough. But there is surely a strong case to bring together on one definitive disc *all* of Auden's 1930s documentary work, including *Beside the Seaside* and *The Londoners*. As it is, this second volume certainly deserves a place in any Auden library, and is warmly recommended. We can all look forward to the third and final volume later this year.

DAVID COLLARD

David Collard is working on a book entitled Auden on Film and would like to offer his grateful thanks to Farnoosh Fathi and Professor Annie Janowitz for their support and advice in the preparation of this review.

Recent and Forthcoming Books and Events

Two lost translations by Auden have been rediscovered by David Collard. In 1935, for a showing at the Film Society of Dziga Vertov's documentary film *Three Hymns to Lenin*, Auden provided verse translations of the three Uzbek folk songs used in the film. The translations were evidently used as intertitles in the print used for the showing. The print was presumably returned to the Soviet Union and has long been lost, along with all other traces of Auden's translations, until David Collard, working in the papers of Ivor Montagu in the library of the British Film Institute discovered Auden's manuscripts of the first two of the three songs.

David Collard published an account of his discovery, together with the texts of the translations, in the *TLS*, 22 May 2009, pp. 14-15, under the title "For the love of Lenin." (The *TLS* trumpeted the story on its front page as "Auden's Lost Hymns to Lenin", although a more accurate title might have been "Auden's Commissioned Translations of Uzbek Folk Poems about Lenin.") The film, with Auden's translations as intertitles, screened at BFI Southbank (formerly the National Film Theatre), on 8 June 2009. The actor Simon Callow read Auden's verses aloud. A full report by David Collard will follow in a future number of the *Newsletter*.

Authors at Work: The Creative Environment, edited by Ceri Sullivan and Graeme Harper, published by D. S. Brewer in July 2009, is a collection of essays on the working habits of seven writers. It includes an essay by Stan Smith, "Gubbins at a Desk: Auden's Cave."

This November at the National Lyttelton Theatre in London, Michael Gambon and Alex Jennings respectively will play W. H. Auden and Benjamin Britten in the premiere of Alan Bennett's new play *The Habit of Art*, directed by Nicholas Hytner. Though Auden and Britten had collaborated on several occasions, including their work on the documentary *Night Mail* and Britten's operetta *Paul Bunyan*, for which Auden wrote the libretto, their relations became strained later in life. The play centers on a fictional meeting between Britten and Auden in the early 1960s, when Auden was in Oxford, after almost two decades of silence between them.

February House, with music and lyrics by Gabriel Kahane and script by Seth Bockley, is a work-in-progress commissioned by the Musical Theatre Initiative for the Public Theater in New York. Inspired by Sherill Tippins' book of the same name, the piece is a musical exploration of 7 Middagh Street, Brooklyn, where, in 1940-41, under the haphazard direction of George Davis, fiction editor at *Harper's Bazaar*, a Victorian brownstone became home to Carson McCullers, Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears, Jane and Paul Bowles, and *de facto paterfamilias*, W. H. Auden. The musical is slated for a workshop at the Public Theater in September; a production may follow in 2010-11.

On 16 June the 40th Poetry International Festival of Rotterdam (13-20 June) hosted a special program about Auden's work.

On June 9th, 2009 sixty people gathered at T'mol Shilshom, Jerusalem's literary café, for an evening "In Memory of W. H. Auden." Organized by three scholars, Professors Shalom Goldman and Laurie Patton of Emory University in Atlanta and Professor Aminadav Dykman of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the event combined readings of Auden's poems in both English and Hebrew with brief talks on Auden's interest in Jewish culture. The evening opened with a recording (from a scratchy LP) of Auden reading "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." This was followed by Laurie Patton's readings of Auden's originals and by Aminadav Dykman of translations into Hebrew. Among the poems read were "In Memory of Sigmund Freud" and "Stop all the clocks."

Aminadav Dykman's Hebrew translations of Auden, published in 1998 under the title *The Shield of Achilles*, are the best-known of Auden's work in Hebrew. He read translations from that volume and also shared a stirring reading of Reuven Avinoam's translation of "Refugee Blues," a poem with powerful resonances for an Israel audience. The end of the formal presentation was Shalom Goldman's reading of a brief essay written for the occasion by Edward Mendelson. Titled "Auden in Jerusalem," it told of Auden's deep interest in Jewish culture and it shared insights in the Auden's reaction to Jerusalem when he visited in 1970 with Chester Kallman and Alan Ansen. But this was not the end of Jerusalem's homage to Auden. Many members of the audience stayed for an extended conversation with the three presenters.

Memberships and Subscriptions

Annual memberships include a subscription to the *Newsletter*:

Individual members	£9	\$15
Students	£5	\$8
Institutions and paper copies	£18	\$30

New members of the Society and members wishing to renew should either (a) pay online with *any* currency by following the link at <http://audensociety.org/membership.html> or (b) use postal mail to send sterling (not dollar!) cheques payable to "The W. H. Auden Society" to Katherine Bucknell, 78 Clarendon Road, London W11 2HW, Receipts available on request.

The W. H. Auden Society is registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales as Charity No. 1104496.

The Newsletter is edited by Farnoosh Fathi. Submissions may be made by post to: The W. H. Auden Society, 78 Clarendon Road, London W11 2HW; or by e-mail to: thenewsletter@audensociety.org

All writings by W. H. Auden in this issue are copyright 2009 by The Estate of W. H. Auden.

Please see the Note to Members that appears on the Contents page of this number.