

PLEASING POETRY

Sir Roger Newdigate 1719-1806, founder of the Newdigate Prize for Poetry

by Mary Pache

It is not known if Sir Roger Newdigate wrote poetry but he is remembered across the centuries for promoting it. It is believed that his family originated in the village of Newdigate in Surrey, but its claims to fame began in Harefield in 1602 when Queen Elizabeth favoured the village with one of her 'progressions'. How favourable it was in reality can be doubted as it cost Harefield £4000, a massive sum at that time. The Newdigates were Lords of the Manor so we might guess that in company with Sir Thomas Egerton, a neighbourhood landowner, they had to unlock the family coffers. A document in Sir Roger's papers describes the visit in detail.

Her Majesty arrived by way of Dewes Farm, known then as the Dairy House, in July 1602. She had to shelter under a tree during the welcome speech as it was raining, so to fulfil the ancient myth we must assume that it was St Swithin's day. This gave a local wordsmith the opportunity to pun upon 'rain' and 'reign'. The days following the feast were sufficiently wet to reinforce the superstition and the scribe of Sir Roger's papers seized on it as a useful marker for pinpointing the actual month of the visit. Many sightings of rainbows inspired a rhymester to compose a poem on the subject. I will note that Sir Roger cannot be accused of generating the following verse as he was not born until over two hundred years later:

In her moist robe of colours gay;
And she cometh, she ever stays,
For the space of forty days
And more or less rains every day.

John Newdigate swapped some Harefield property for an Elizabethan mansion and estate at Arbury, near Nuneaton, and his branch of the family went to live there in 1845. It seems that he was not 'good with money' or had bad luck, but he died in the Fleet debtors' prison.

Thereafter Dame Fortune smiled and his heirs were vastly more successful. By the time Sir Roger inherited through the premature deaths of five older brothers he was rich enough to rebuild the Elizabethan mansion in neo-Gothic style. He proceeded to spend surplus time, energy and money on projects concerning canals, coal mining and being an MP. He collected everything ancient he could lay his hands on, everything that Sir John Soane had not snapped up first. He was a patron of literature and poetry, and a substantial benefactor of University College, Oxford where he had studied.

I have been unable to trace any physical descriptions of the Newdigates perhaps because no scribe at Harefield took note of physiognomy. At Arbury, however, there was a land agent with a young daughter who grew up to become George Eliot. Sir Roger had been dead for twenty-five years before she was old enough to spend time with the staff at the 'big house' to listen and observe. The older retainers recounted their vivid memories of Sir Roger's tiresome enthusiasms and the domestic upheavals arising from his determination to pursue the 'gothicisation' of his home. The girl, Mary Ann Evans, wandered around the house gazing at family portraits and storing the impressions in her mind.

Years later she wrote *Scenes of Clerical Life* and brought Sir Roger himself to life as Sir Christopher Cheverel in the love story of a respected parish cleric, Mr Gilfil. She describes Sir Christopher/Roger from a full-length portrait in the saloon as 'a splendid old gentleman' with sparkling dark eyes under 'bushy grizzled eyebrows' and 'good-natured lines about the mouth'. The portrait of his nephew and heir impressed her adversely as being 'destitute of charm' in spite of 'a blond complexion', 'taper fingers' and a 'finely cut transparent nostril'.

George Eliot describes an incident which shows Sir Roger to be confident of his own judgement in the case of a widow who asks for his support in a way that he perceives as unwise. He helps her generously in *his* way.

The house itself is still standing in all its castellated dignity, has 'many-shaped panes in mullioned windows', 'flanking towers' and 'too formal symmetry' in the front. At the time of the incident described above the saloon had an 'unfinished ceiling . . . in the style of florid pointed Gothic', a bow window 'elaborate in its tracery . . . like petrified lacework' then unfinished as indicated by 'scaffolding, ladders and tools'.

One of Sir Roger's gifts to his College was the founding and funding of the eponymous prize for poetry. The requirements are that

the entrant must be a present or recent undergraduate of an Oxford college, the poem must not exceed 300 lines, can be in any style except 'dramatic form of composition'. It appears that the prize is frozen at the going rate of 1806 at 21 guineas but this is an acceptable token as the main prize is the reading of the poem at the prestigious Encaemia. This is an annual ceremony when the intellectual aristocracy turn out in full regalia for the presentation of honorary degrees. Past winners are John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, Oscar Wilde, John Buchan, and Andrew Motion. Their subsequent career successes are attributed to the prize so the 21st century winners, Rachel Piercy, Arabella Currie and Lavinia Singer may look forward to becoming household names of the future.

References

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