

Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey

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Abstract: Beginning with a brief account of the history of Westminster Abbey and its physical structure, this paper concentrates on the British writers honored in the South Transept or Poet's Corner section. It identifies those recognized who are no longer thought to be outstanding, those now understood to be outstanding who are not recognized, and provides an alphabetical listing of the honored members of dead poet's society, Britain's honored writers, along with the works for which they are best known. Key terms: Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey, South Transept.

CHRISTIANITY RETURNS AND CHURCHES ARE BUILT

A walk through Westminster Abbey is a walk through time and through English history from the time of the Norman conquest. Most of that journey is concerned with the crowned heads of England, but not all. One section of the Abbey has been dedicated to the major figures in British literature. This paper is concerned mainly with the major poets, novelists and dramatists of Britain, but that concentration still requires a little historical background.

For over nine centuries, English monarchs have been both crowned and buried in Westminster Abbey. The Angles, Saxons and Jutes who conquered and occupied England in the mid 5th century were pagans. But, as the story goes, Pope Gregory saw two fair-haired boys in the Roman market who were being sold as slaves and asked who they were. He was told that they were Angles. He replied that they looked more like angels (*angeli* more than *angli*) and determined that these pagan people should be converted to Christianity. Originally (again as the story goes) he intended to do the converting himself, but he ended up sending a priest, Augustine, with 50 monks to Kent in 597 A.D. to reestablish Christianity on the island. Reestablish because the Romans who had occupied the island until 150 years previously had brought Christianity with

them when they conquered the Celts in 41 A.D. Although it seemed to be a suicide mission, when the missionaries landed, they were allowed by King Aethelbert to stay and were given a house at Canterbury. The missionaries also brought with them both literacy and the Roman alphabet. There was a small Anglo-Saxon Christian church built at Westminster some time after those Christian missionaries arrived in England. Then, Edward the Confessor (1004-1066) demolished that church and built a new church on the same spot in the 11th century. That building was completed in time for his own burial in front of the High Altar. Then that second building was replaced just as the first one had been, but the king's grave was preserved. So, the present Westminster Abbey is the third church on that site.

The building of the present Gothic-style cathedral began during the reign of Henry III (1207-1272) in 1245, and lasted for over two hundred and fifty years. This meant, of course, changes of monarchs, builders, plans and materials along the way. But this was also what commonly happened when people built large stone structures in the second half (the feudal portion) of the medieval period. If it took a hundred years or more, the royals or nobles, the builders and the plans changed. During the reigns of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, the Abbey changed from being a Roman Catholic cathedral to being an Anglican one. In the 17th Century, the Puritans overturned the monarchy and, because they didn't approve of religious art, destroyed to a large extent the altars and artwork in the Abbey. I am reminded of a quotation from H.L. Mencken who said that a Puritan was a person who was worried that someone somewhere might be having fun. With the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 the Puritan influence was reversed and the art replaced. In fact, the leader of the Puritans, Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), who was

buried in the Abbey, was disinterred and hanged on a gallows; he was beheaded, and his head was placed on a pike for the citizens of London to see and condemn (Athey 1996).

EARLY BURIALS IN THE ABBEY

To be buried in the Abbey has come to represent the highest honor England can bestow, which is why the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior from WW I is there near the entrance. He is, as the inscription reads, “buried among kings.” But the conferral of this high status mostly gained momentum in the 18th and 19th centuries. Before that, a variety of people were buried there. Not only kings and queens, but commoners, clergy, laypeople, wives, workers at the Abbey and an unknown child found dead in what is called the Dark Cloister. It was during the Victorian Age (1819-1901) that the Abbey achieved its position as a national institution. It was at this time that a heating system was first installed. It was at this time also that burial became more restrictive, more selective and the tombs became more elaborate (Athey, 1996). Perhaps I should mention that the English have a tradition that they will not raise a monument to a person until after that person’s death; that time lapse allows a little perspective and objectivity for the evaluation of the person in question and makes the recognition less political. For example, Margaret Thatcher would like to have a statue of herself in London, but the English won’t sanction one while she is alive. The idea that Wellington Webb, the mayor of Denver, would have an entire building named for himself while he was not only alive but still in office would be regarded as totally inappropriate, shameless self-aggrandizing behavior by the English. Similarly, the Poet’s Corner recognition is not for living writers.

The Nazi Luftwaffe (meaning air-weapon) air raids of the Blitz and the V1 and V2

rockets during WWII inflicted enormous damage on London and the Abbey. The air attacks set fires all over London, the fighting of which exhausted the city water supply. There was no water to put out the burning Abbey roof, which broke away from the stone walls, fell 130 feet to the floor, and eventually burned itself out. Post war restoration replaced the roof, and added color and light to the Abbey as new glass replaced old glass (Athey, 1996). If one pays the six pounds admission fee and enters the Abbey, and walks with the traffic in a clockwise direction, he/she can see all of the important monarchs and many of the unimportant ones. And if one walks far enough, he/she will finally arrive at the South Transept or southern lateral arm of the church. It was common from medieval times onward to design and build churches in *cruciform* so that they resembled a large cross on the ground. Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris is a classic example. Typically one entered the church at the foot of the cross and looked toward the altar that was toward the head of the cross. The South Transept can be visualized as being where the left arm of the cross is in the Abbey. This is where Poet's Corner is located.

THE TRADITION OF RECOGNITION

As to the poets, begin with the fact that we do not know the name of the person who wrote *Beowulf*. *Beowulf* remains for scholars to read, but the name of the writer is lost in the long dark corridors of history. Caedmon (of the mid 7th century) was the first English poet that we do know about, but he wrote sacred verse in Old English, intended to be sung in monasteries, so what he wrote would not be intelligible to us now. It would sound much like German. We might not have known about him, except that he was identified a hundred years later by The Venerable Bede in a book titled *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Speaking People*. As for the poets we do recognize and are able to

read, Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400) author of *The Canterbury Tales*, was the first one buried and thus inadvertently initiated the establishment of a custom. Chaucer was a high public official and a resident on the Abbey grounds when he died. So he was buried there not because he was a poet, but because he was an important church administrator. Two hundred years later, Edmund Spenser requested burial along side Chaucer. His request was honored, and a tradition was begun.

After that the question became who “made the cut,” or who was good enough to be recognized by being buried there and who was to be excluded. When he visited Poet’s Corner in the Abbey, Joseph Addison said, “In the poetic corner, I found there were poets who had no monuments and monuments which had no poets.” Meaning that there are people who are great who are not there and people who are not great who are there. Some of the former greats who are buried there are no longer seen as important. They have fallen out of favor, or perhaps they were never that good in the first place. Their works have not stood the test of time. These would include Francis Beavmont, Aphra Behn, Sir John Betjeman, William Camden, Sir John Denham, Michael Drayton, Sir Robert Moray, Mathew Prior, Charles de St. Denis, and the Victorian novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton. Bulwer-Lytton wrote *The Last Days of Pompeii* which is a very shallow treatment of that historical event. He is also known for being the person who wrote, and I am not making this up, “It was a dark and stormy night.” All this time you thought it was Snoopy the dog who wrote that. There is actually what is called a “wretched writing” contest put on annually by the English Department of San Jose State University in California. The winner of this national contest receives the Edward Bulwer-Lytton Award. So in a way, you might say he is somehow memorable after all.

As for the people who could be honored by a place in the Abbey but are not, I have a few suggestions. These would include early poets such as John Donne, Robert Herrick, and Andrew Marvell. I have not included Christopher Marlowe because I do not believe he wrote Shakespeare's plays for the simple reason that Shakespeare's greatest works were written well after Marlowe's death. Also because Marlowe's known plays such as *Edward II* do not compare to Shakespeare's and his poetic works are very few in number. Some later writers might I might include would be Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Edward Fitzgerald, and Robert Louis Stevenson (for *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*). I believe that the most significant exclusion from Poet's Corner is James Joyce who is known for *The Dubliners*, *The Dead*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegan's Wake*. Other probables might be Ezra Pound, an American poet who lived in London from the time he was twenty-three, A. E. Housman, John Stuart Mill, William Butler Yeats (who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923) and Sir William Schwenck Gilbert. And I think just possibly Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and Charlie Chaplin. And if an American could be honored in the Abbey, why not someone from another one of the colonies? Why not a Canadian? I would recommend Robertson Davies, Canada's greatest writer, known for the Cornish trilogy, the Salterton trilogy and the Deptford trilogy. This is not an extensive list. You can probably think of others.

The question of who is buried there is confused by the presence of monuments to people who are not buried there. Shakespeare, for example, is not buried there, he is buried in Stratford, but a statue honoring him is prominent. Mathew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, and the WW I poets are not buried there, but they are honored there. Others honored but not

buried include Jane Austen, William Blake, the Bronte sisters, Robert Burns, Samuel Butler, Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas Gray, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Henry James, John Keats, John Milton, John Ruskin, Sir Walter Scott, Percy Shelley, and William Wordsworth. Others are honored by a place in the Abbey even though their ideas and behaviors do not reflect the religious values of the church the Abbey represents. Percy Bysshe Shelley was an atheist. George Eliot was an atheist. Thomas Hardy was also an atheist. Gerard Manley Hopkins was a Jesuit. Lord Byron seems to have been known more for his celebrity than his poetry. D.H. Lawrence wrote what was then considered pornography. And it took until 1995, just nine years ago, for the Abbey to recognize Oscar Wilde. Wilde once said, "There is no such thing as a dirty book. Books are well written or poorly written, and that is all."

THE DISTINGUISHED DEAD

So, who is in this "dead poet's society?" The Abbey's listing of poets is like an outline of the evolution and development of English literature. So the list sounds like an anthology of readings for an English survey course. I should mention that the Poet's Corner also honors novelists and dramatists. And I should also mention that there are non-poets such as Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin and Michael Faraday who are buried elsewhere in the Abbey but not with the poets. I will try to give to you the honored dead, the residents, in alphabetical order, even though that listing leaps backward and forward in time. And I will identify only the major works, what I believe to be the classics and most known literature, not all of the minor and largely forgotten works.

We begin with Joseph Addison for *The Spectator*.

W.H. Auden for *Funeral Blues* and *Five Songs*.

Jane Austen for *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Persuasion*, *Mansfield Park*, and most notably *Pride and Prejudice*.

Mathew Arnold for *Immortality*, *Requiescat*, *Growing Old*, and *Dover Beach*.

William Blake for *Songs of Innocence*, *Milton*, and *The Tyger*.

Samuel Butler for *The Way of All Flesh*.

Robert Burns for *A Red Red Rose*, *To a Mouse*, and *Auld Lang Syne*.

The Bronte sisters, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne: Emily wrote *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte wrote *Jane Eyre*, and Anne wrote a novel that very few have ever heard of titled *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Rupert Brooke for *The War Sonnets* (Brooke died in 1914 from blood poisoning, but not in battle) most notably *The Soldier* with the lines:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there is some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England.

The other WWI poets were not nearly so blindly patriotic nor so acquiescent about death.

Robert Browning for *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, *Home Thoughts from Abroad* (“Oh to be in England now that April’s there”), *The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church*, *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*, and *My Last Duchess*. Elizabeth Barrett Browning is buried in Florence, Italy which some of you may remember from the first scene of the movie *Tea With Mussolini*. If you walk around in Florence on the east bank of the Arno, it is easy to find her house. On the wall outside is inscribed a phrase from her writings about what she could hear in the street from her second floor window.

George Gordon (or Lord) Byron for a poem titled *John Keats*

Lewis Carroll (who was mathematician Charles Dodgson) for *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *Through the Looking Glass*, *Hunting the Snark*, and *Jabberwocky*.

Geoffrey Chaucer for *The Canterbury Tales*.

William Congreve (a dramatist) for *The Way of the World*.

Noel Coward for five comedies: *Hay Fever*, *Private Lives*, *Design for Living*, *Blithe Spirit*, and *Personal Laughter*. But I remember also *Separate Tables* and the lines from the song: “At twelve noon the natives swoon and no further work is done,
but mad dogs and English men go out in the noonday sun.”

Charles Dickens for *Hard Times*, *Bleak House*, *David Copperfield*, *Pickwick Papers*, *Bartleby the Scrivener*, *Oliver Twist*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Great Expectations* and a long list of other works. A Dickens scholar has a lot to read. Dickens had an unusual talent for naming characters such as Ebenezer Scrooge and Uriah Heep. And every time we see *A Christmas Carol* I am struck with how many common expressions we have that are from Dickens. Now, more than 130 years after his death, every year on the anniversary of his death in 1870, a wreath is laid on his tomb. No one else in the Abbey is honored in this way.

John Dryden, a dramatist, for *MacFlecknoe*.

George Eliot (who was actually Mary Ann Evans) for *The Mill on the Floss*, *Scenes of a Clerical Life*, *Silas Marner*, and most notably *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch*. In her will she requested burial in Westminster Abbey, but that was not permitted.

Thomas Sterns Eliot is honored there, even though he is an American. The English claim him so we often lose sight of that. He lived in England from the age of 26. He received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948 for *The Wasteland*. He is known also for *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, and because of the musical *CATS*, he is known now for *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. Until I read that, back in the 1960s, I didn't know that Eliot had a sense of humor or that he called himself Old Possum.

There is a story about Eliot that I especially like. Eliot was from Missouri; his father was a professor at Washington University. When Eliot won the Nobel Prize some students from his father's university got together and bought a phonograph record which they then sent to Eliot. It was, "You Come a Long Way From Saint Louie."

David Garrick, who was both an actor and dramatist, noted for *King Arthur*, *King Lear*, and *Cymbeline*, and for presenting Shakespeare's plays when no one else did.

John Gay for *The Beggar's Opera* which because of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill became the *Drei Groschen Opera* which became the *Three Penny Opera* which became Bobby Darrin singing "Mack the Knife." This was the first major work in which all of the characters were disreputable. They were all thieves, pimps, whores, thugs, burglars, robbers, drunks and miscellaneous perverted scummy lowlifes. Of course, nowadays in movies, that's the norm; now it difficult to find a single virtuous person.

Oliver Goldsmith for *She Stoops to Conquer*.

Robert Graves for *I Claudius*, *Lawrence and the Arabs*, *Goodbye to All That*, and the WWI poetry. His second wife, Beryl, died recently in October of 2003.

Thomas Gray for *Ode to Spring*, *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, and *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, which has been called the most perfect poem in the English language. I would not dispute that.

George Frederic Handel, the composer, is buried there even though was a German. He lived most of his life in England and is most known for *The Messiah*.

Thomas Hardy was both a poet and a novelist. He is known mostly for *Return of the Native*, *Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*.

Gerard Manley Hopkins for *God's Grandeur*, *The Windhover*, and *Spring and Fall*.

John Keats for a sonnet (with the line which begins "When I have fears that I may cease to be...") and *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*.

John Milton for *Lycidas*, *Samson Agonistes*, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and an often overlooked masterpiece, *The Areopagitica*, an anti censorship essay.

William James was an American born in New York, a Harvard professor who visited occasionally in England, and was neither a poet nor a dramatist. He, however, is honored in Poet's Corner. He is known for *The Principles of Psychology*, *A Study in Human Behavior*, and *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Go figure. So far as I could tell, he is the only psychologist honored there.

Henry James, the younger brother of William James, also born in New York and lived in England, but was a prolific novelist. Mostly known for *The Bostonians*, *Portrait of a Lady*, *Daisy Miller*, *The American*, and *The Turn of the Screw*. So, there are two American James brothers who are honored in the Abbey. Not Frank and Jesse, but William and Henry.

Samuel Johnson, a brilliant essayist, mostly known for being the first person to produce *A Dictionary of the English Language*.

Ben Jonson for *To Celia* which begins with the line "Drink to me only with thine eyes" Ben Jonson is buried standing up because he didn't have money for a full sized plot. His epitaph reads "O Rare Ben Johnson," and for some strange reason, his name is misspelled with an h. A Ben Jonson quotation which I have always liked is that, "Satire should not be like a saw, but like a sword. It should cut but not mangle."

Rudyard Kipling for *Barrackroom Ballads*, *The Man Who Would Be King*, *The Jungle Book*, *Kim*, *The White Man's Burden* and if you have not heard Boris Karloff read *The Just So Stories*, you still have a wonderful treat ahead.

D. H. Lawrence, a poet and a novelist, for *Sons and Lovers*, *Women in Love*, and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. He had a home north of Taos, New Mexico which you can still visit for a small fee. It has a great view west to the Rio Grande valley.

Edward Lear for nonsense verse and limericks. Consider this. Edward Lear is buried there for limericks, but George Eliot, who wrote *Adam Bede*, is not.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, an American poet, born and died in America, wrote only of American things, but he is honored there. He is known for *Endymion*, *Evangeline*, *The Children's Hour*, *The Jewish Cemetery at Newport*, *The Village Blacksmith*, *The Song of Hiawatha*, *The Skeleton in Armor*, and *Paul Revere's Ride*.

Thomas Babington Macaulay for *Lord Clive*.

John Masefield for *Sea Fever*.

Lawrence Olivier, an actor, for a whole body of work, very little of it permanent, but that is the nature of theater. He won an Oscar for *Hamlet* in 1947 and was also knighted in 1947. He starred in numerous plays and motion pictures including *Othello*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Rebecca*, and *Henry V*. I saw him in London in *Rhinoceros*. David Garrick was an actor, but he was also a dramatist. How an actor who is not a dramatist is selected is a mystery. So far as I can see, Olivier is the only one.

Wilfred Owen for WW I poems, particularly *Anthem for Doomed Youth* and *Dulce et Decorum est*. Owen was killed in action by a German machine gun at the age of twenty-five in November of 1918 just seven days before the armistice.

Alexander Pope for *The Rape of the Lock*, *An Essay on Man*, *Moral Essays*, and *An Essay on Criticism*.

John Ruskin, a professor of fine art known for prose rather than poetry. He wrote *Modern Painters*, *The Poetry of Architecture*, *The Stones of Venice*, *Morning in Florence*, and the *Bible of Amiens*.

Siegfried Sassoon (another WWI poet along with Robert Graves and Wilfred Owen) known mainly for anti-war poetry such as *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, *Counter Attack and other Poems*, and *Suicide in the Trenches*.

Sir Walter Scott for *Lay of the Last Minstrel*, *Lady of the Lake*, *Ivanhoe* and *Rob Roy*. He is usually credited with being the creator of the historical novel.

William Shakespeare, both a poet and a dramatist, for the histories, the comedies, and the tragedies. During his career, he wrote approximately one play per year. During his career he also wrote over 150 sonnets. He didn't make up the plots for plays. Those already existed, and some were well known. What he did was make the plots into plays and put marvelous language into the mouths of the characters. I would imagine, for example, that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Henry V* were both much more eloquent than the original *Hamlet* and *Henry V*.

Percy Bysshe Shelley: people are familiar with *Ode to the West Wind* and *To a Skylark* ("Hail to thee blithe spirit") but he also wrote an *Essay on Christianity*, *Defence of Poetry*, and *The Necessity of Atheism*. And you are probably aware that his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, when she was twenty-one years old, wrote *Frankenstein: the*

Modern Prometheus, and is much better known now than Percy. Life is full of these little ironies.

George Bernard Shaw, an Irish playwright, social critic and Nobel Prize winner known for *Caesar and Cleopatra*, *Three Plays for Puritans*, *Candida*, *The Illusions of Socialism*, *The Devil's Disciple*, and *Androcles and the Lion*, but most notably for *Major Barbara*, *Arms and the Man*, *Pygmalion*, and *St. Joan*. Shaw portrayed Joan of Arc not as a martyr or a saint, but as an exceedingly stubborn young woman. You could somewhat understand why people might want to burn her at the stake to get rid of her.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan for *The Rivals*, and *School for Scandal* and for creating Mrs. Malaprop, a character who has become a word in the dictionary, a malapropism.

Robert Southey for *The Battle of Blenheim*.

Edmund Spenser for *The Faerie Queene*.

Jonathan Swift, a satirist, for *Tale of a Tub*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and we must remember A Modest Proposal, which suggested that the Irish should eat their own children.

Alfred Lord Tennyson for *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, and *Crossing the Bar*.

Dylan Thomas, a Welshman, who wrote both prose and poetry, best known for *Adventures in the Skin Trade*, A refusal to mourn the death by fire of a child in London, *Under Milkwood*, A Child's Christmas in Wales, Fern Hill, and two poems recognized for their first lines: "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower," and "Do not go gentle into that good night."

Anthony Trollope, known mainly for *Barchester Towers*.

Oscar Wilde for *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, and mostly for being himself.

William Wordsworth for *Lyrical Ballads*, *Intimations of Immortality*, *Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey*, *Upon Westminster Bridge*, and the following familiar poems, *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*, *She was a Phantom of Delight*, *The World is Too Much With Us*, and *My Heart Leaps Up* ("when I behold a rainbow in the sky").

NO SIMILAR HONOR HERE

That is fifty-nine of the memorable people if we keep Anne Bronte with Charlotte and Emily, even though by most standards she does not deserve it. I have left out those writers very few would recognize and have identified only major works. Of course, there

is nothing like Poet's Corner for Americans, which is probably a good thing, because I can imagine how politicized the selection process would be. There is a whole raft of people in the United States who would want to exclude the works of anyone with whom they disagreed or found objectionable or believed to be immoral. Or they might have confused popularity with value so we would have to include the best sellers such as *Gone With the Wind*. And nowadays there would almost certainly be politically correct social pressure to make sure that there was sufficient diversity. ("We need a Hispanic lesbian with epilepsy.") When demographics become the/a criterion measure, we move farther and farther from the actual text and farther from any selection based on merit. Mark Twain, probably our greatest writer, would have heavy sledding even being considered because most people don't understand why Nigger Jim is called Nigger Jim. Americans, I believe, would have botched the process, but for the most part, the English have done it right. They created an honor for literary artists and a place where they can be remembered and respected. Poet's corner is a wonderful idea and a wonderful execution of that idea. I hope you enjoyed the tour.

Reference

See Athey, Joel. *Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey*. Pasadena, CA: Nugent Printing, 1996, for material on the history of the building.

Endnote: novels, plays, and other longer or book length titles are identified by italics, as are words in Latin, but poems and shorter essays are not.

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