



AN EXHIBITION ON

FORREST REID & STEPHEN GILBERT

The Forrest Reid and Stephen Gilbert Collections at the Queen's University Belfast

The Forrest Reid and Stephen Gilbert Collections consist of a large number of manuscripts written by, or relating to, the authors Forrest Reid and Stephen Gilbert. Gilbert was a protégé of Reid's and also served as his literary executor following his death in 1947. The archive includes thousands of items stored in 50 archival boxes, and is one of the larger literary collections within Special Collections at The Library of Queen's University Belfast.

There is a wealth of many different kinds of material within these archives. Types of material include drafts and proofs of published and unpublished works complete with author's revisions and corrections, notebooks giving an insight into the creative process, photographs of family and friends, Christmas cards and post cards, listings and bibliographies of a private library, newspaper cuttings, printed ephemera, and prints and illustrations reflecting Reid's interest in art. Of particular importance are the items of correspondence within the collections which comprise missives from such literary figures as E M Forster, Walter de la Mare, AE, and Padraic Colum, as well as letters between Gilbert and Reid themselves.

The two authors are largely forgotten in their native Ulster, although during his lifetime E M Forster, who valued Reid's work highly, referred to him as the 'most important man in Belfast'. Meanwhile, Gilbert's most acclaimed work *Ratman's Notebooks*, has been adapted for the Hollywood screen twice, as the horror film *Willard*. One of the animal characters he created, an intelligent rat who befriends a human, was even the subject of Michael Jackson's first solo hit single *Ben*.

2 The papers offer valuable insights into the literary world of early to mid twentieth century Britain and Ireland, and correspondence with authors, editors and critics is filled with reflections on their work, moral and social questions, the creative process, and literary gossip.

The mechanics of, and inspiration behind, the act of creative writing is well demonstrated within the collections, particularly in the case of Reid. The process of writing is often sharply debated in letters, and creative processes are further illuminated in the heavily revised and densely annotated drafts of works, both published and incomplete. Notebooks and transcriptions evidence the research, memory aids, and layered construction inherent in crafting prose, as notes and jottings are added to skeletal plotlines and chapter headings.

THE NEW
CHRISTMAS RHYME BOOK,



BELFAST :
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26 CHURCH LANE.

The papers are also a rich resource for social history. Correspondents of Reid's talk of the industrialised decimation of a generation between 1914 and 1918, Zeppelin raids, army barracks life in a Second World War army camp, colonial duties in the Middle East, and Hindu festivals in India. Reid himself was a more politically insular character but his prose pictures of Belfast remain fresh and evocative, and his mundane run ins with the censorship of post and the petty difficulties of rationing during war time are glimpsed in his letters, and show how the war wheedled its way into every crevice of ordinary life.

The bonds and tensions between Reid and Gilbert are also apparent from their personal papers. They were friends, but being separated by almost four decades, it was a relationship of mentor and protégé, teacher and pupil. It was also a story of unrequited love; Reid's thinly screened homosexuality barely masked an adoration of Gilbert. The latter though close to Reid, did not and could not reciprocate, and indeed chafed at Reid's occasional possessiveness and waspishness. In many ways it was a friendship of opposites, Reid other worldly, homosexual and projecting a fading gentility, whilst Gilbert was youthful, married, practical and business headed, and had experienced the brutality of wartime service first hand. Yet Reid influenced Gilbert's work in many ways, and was a ready source of encouragement. Gilbert's own vision skewed and twisted many of Reid's themes and motifs into forms bearing the stamp of a more cynical age. Few archives in Britain or Ireland better illustrate the tensions and limits between literary mentor and pupil.

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MS 44/7/4



MS 44/6/1/89



MS 44/6/1/92

Forrest Reid

His Life and Background

Reid was born in 1875, the youngest child of a Presbyterian family in the shipping trade; on his mother's side he could claim descent from Katherine Parr, wife of Henry VIII, a source of some wistful pride to the young Forrest. Educated at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, he did not excel, but equally found that his studies provided little strain. The family had suffered a fall in circumstances as the father's shipping ventures had collapsed, so the young Forrest found that the family's middle class gentility was distinctly frayed at the edges, and although never poor, his upbringing was one of forced economies and the keeping up of appearances. Indeed, fear of social descent and a flickering snobbishness were to permeate many of his youthful characters in his writings. His father died when he was young, and his mother was a remote figure, who demonstrated little warmth. Reid's chief parental figure had been his beloved nurse Emma Holmes, who was forced to leave the family employ following the death of Reid's father in 1881. A decline in social fortunes had thus robbed Reid of the one source of affection and unqualified love.

A shy and sensitive child, Reid showed a penchant for play that involved collecting and make believe. But insularity did not mean passivity, and Reid showed a youthful disdain for middle class mercantile and Protestant values of probity and religious observance. The young Reid rejected the family's Christian conformity, instead opting for a code of spirituality and individualism based on the teachings of ancient Greece. This dislike of middle class rectitude, materialism and conformity was to prove a strong theme throughout his works.

Reid was apprenticed to the tea trade as a young man, but eventually went up to Cambridge. This did not lead to a blossoming of his literary talent as Reid was to describe his time at university as a 'rather blank interlude'. He returned to Belfast, and during the next forty years lived privately and unostentatiously in the east of the city. Reid corresponded widely however, and his novels established for him a reputation as a notable prose stylist.

The central theme throughout much of his works was boyhood and youth, and Reid himself noted his limitations of scope by pondering that some 'arrested development' prevented him from fully realizing a world of only adult relationships. Nevertheless, his novels were rich in themes of dream landscapes, animism, paganism, magical transformation, loss and class decline.

Reid wrote 17 novels most of which focus on boyhood, adolescence and friendship, as does his autobiographical work *Apostate* (1926). The first *Kingdom of Twilight* (1904) was warmly supported by Henry James, but the second *The Garden God* (1905) was repudiated in an angry letter by James because of its homoerotic overtones. *The Spring Song* (1916) and *Pirates of the Spring* (1919) depicts childhood friendship and terrors in a pastoral setting, whilst *At the Door of the Gate* (1915) portrays class tensions and prejudices in Belfast, and a young man's resentment at the middle class pretensions of his struggling family. *Peter Waring* (1937) is a root and branch revision of the earlier *Following Darkness* (1912) which tells the story of a boy's unhappy development in the households of a cold schoolteacher father and his vulgar Belfast relations. *Denis Bracknell* (1947), another overhauling of an earlier work, also portrays a stern father heading a somewhat dysfunctional family, whilst the son is a paganistic Moon worshipper who rejects the claustrophobic values of his middle class family. *Brian Westby* tells the story of a reunited father and adolescent son, whilst *Demophon* (1927) is a coming of age story filled with beings from Greek mythology. Arguably Reid's best fiction can be found in the Tom Barber trilogy, comprising the novels *Uncle Stephen* (1931), *The Retreat* (1936), and *Young Tom* (1944), this last segment winning for Reid the James Tait Memorial prize. The trilogy explores myths and dreams through a boy's eyes at different stages of his life, but can also be read as a simple celebration of the vitality and imagination of youth, and a sense of connection with nature.

6 A powerful nostalgic yearning for youth, love, the pastoral and the certainties of the imagination fuelled Reid's writings. As Reid put it, the 'primary impulse of the artist springs, I fancy, from discontent and his art is a kind of crying for Elysium'.

Reid also wrote highly regarded critical studies of Yeats and Walter de la Mare, an examination of nineteenth century art, and many essays and short stories.

WOODCUT TAKEN FROM 'APOSTATE'



TITLE PAGE OF 'APOSTATE'



MS 44/7/4

Stephen Gilbert

His Life and Work

The novelist Stephen Gilbert was born in Newcastle, County Down in July 1912. His father was William Gilbert, a Belfast seed and tea merchant. His upbringing was thoroughly middle class, and the young Gilbert was sent away to boarding schools in England and Scotland. Although he concealed a dislike of the private school experience, it was here that his budding literary talents were first made manifest. Gilbert, occasionally helped by school friends, produced *The Broadcaster*, a handwritten and illustrated digest of stories, news and essays which he would post to relatives back home. After finishing his education he worked as a reporter on the *Northern Whig* between 1931 and 1934, when he joined his father in the family associated business of Samuel McCausland Ltd. Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War Gilbert joined the 3rd Ulster Searchlight Regiment serving as a gunner. He saw action in the British Expeditionary Force retreat to Dunkirk and in 1940 he was awarded the Military Medal. He was commissioned as an officer in 1941, and was moved around many barracks in England. Soon after, he was released from service to return to the McCausland's agricultural business.

Gilbert married in the mid 1940s and set up home in a farmhouse in Gilnahirk, dividing his time between business and farming. In the 1960s he was also active in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, acting as secretary to the Northern Ireland branch for two years and helping organize marches and demonstrations in support of the movement. At the time Gilbert felt that 'what was the good of all the writers, all human achievement, if there was going to be no audience'. Whilst Reid used his writing as a retreat into an Edenic dreamscape or imagined past, Gilbert feared that a horrific future would rend apart all art and civilisation. His writing incorporated the shock of the new but did not retreat from it. Themes of horror, and corruption of the natural order, seeped through his work. Although his first novel *The Landslide* (1943) was a wonder story of a lighter hue, conflict between past and present, and the antagonistic nature of modern humanity were nevertheless strong elements. His other novels were darker fantasies; *Monkeyface* (1948) told the story of an intelligent ape exploited by its human masters, whilst *The Burnaby Experiments* (1952) dealt with quasi scientific and occult researches ending in death and possession. Whilst in 1960 Gilbert felt that he 'may be finished as a writer' his most successful piece was yet to come. *Ratman's Notebooks* (1968) is a horror concerning an emotionally deadened, but embittered, youth who trains rats to attack and kill his enemies – the

Reid's World

The Literary Milieu

'...great art is essentially lonely. . . The work that counts is more likely to be conceived in a rectory on the Yorkshire moors, or in a cottage in the Lake Country, than in the self-conscious atmosphere of literary circles.'
Reid in *WB Yeats: A Critical Study*.

Reid was not a writer who formed part of a tightly knit local literary coterie. When he won the James Tait Memorial prize for *Young Tom* in 1944, there were no celebratory dinners, speeches or ceremonies. He simply took a tram into Belfast, watched an opera production, had a bottle of Guinness with a friend, and returned to his home at 13 Ormiston Crescent on the eastern fringes of Belfast, where he lived alone.

While forming no part of any fashionable circle, he was certainly far from being an isolated figure. Reid corresponded widely, and formed friendships with E M Forster, Walter de la Mare, publisher George Faber, AE (the pseudonym of George Russell), Padriac Colum, John Hampson Simpson, and the French poet Marc André Raffalovich amongst others. Local writers such as George Buchanan and the dramatist John Boyd were also numbered amongst his close friends. Smaller runs of correspondence also exist between Reid and figures such as W B Yeats and C S Lewis.

There were few writers of the 1930s or 1940s whom Reid admired, and many of Reid's favourite authors, such as Henry James and Anatole France, were first discovered in his youth. Although Reid initially affected a certain arched and opulent style in his first novel *The Kingdom of Twilight*, it was in studying the technique of James and France that he began to perfect his craft. In a study of Reid, the critic Mary Bryan detected the influences of Henry James and Joseph Conrad in his imaginative realism, and Wilkie Collins, Arthur Machen and Robert Louis Stevenson in his writings which touched on the supernatural. Reid's own urge to revisit the past, break the hold of time, and thus recapture the emotions of youth, may also have drawn on the works of Proust.

Reid's Ulster

Reid was born, raised, and lived virtually all his life in Belfast. His first home was in Mount Charles in South Belfast, and he also took rooms in South Parade and Dublin Road, before settling into a modest house in 13 Ormiston Crescent on the leafy outskirts of Belfast. His early memories attest to a powerful connection to place

and his autobiographical work *Apostate* is replete with evocations and remembrances of the Lagan River, Botanic Gardens and Ormeau Park. Although Reid could write convincingly of the squalor of working class Belfast, or the drab claustrophobia of middle class streets, it was in re-imagining zones where the city met with the rural that he displayed most interest, and most skill. Whether it is recalling the soft notes of a band playing in Ormeau on an autumn afternoon, or recreating the rich sensory experience of a hot summer day on the banks of the Lagan, Reid used these memories to express his own dream visions.



MS 44/7/1

REID'S FRIEND JAMES RUTHERFORD WITH PAN THE BULLDOG AND PUSS THE CAT

Rural landscape and place occupies an important position within Reid's fiction. His early recollections of Belfast and its rural surroundings, and trips through the countryside of the north of Ireland, do not simply colour his imagination but are resources on which he repeatedly drew in crafting a variety of landscape motifs, all of which were used to signal a particular mood, sentiment or transformation. In novels such as *The Retreat*, *At the Door of the Gate*, or *Peter Waring*, Reid conjured prose pictures of the Donegal strands, or the Mourne mountains, which aimed to foster a sense of intoxication, mystery and elemental nature. The otherworldly was threaded through the Ulster countryside. This was no picture book sentimentality, Reid derided much of the scenery on his continental trips as a 'series of rather crude magic lantern slides' whereas Ireland had texture and shade, and 'is more spiritual; it is more remote and imaginative, with a kind of light that never shone anywhere else. . .'





Dream Worlds, Transformation and Magic

Reid would create visionary worlds in his work, but they always remained an adjunct to the real world. The dream landscapes were to be rooted in a vivid description of real places. As the author argues in *The Retreat* no 'invisible world' exists, just 'degrees of perfection in the organs of vision'. A sense of the supernatural Reid noted, was 'inseparable from my conception of reality'. There was no clear dividing line, no firm boundary between dream and substance. Reid's dreams might inform his invocation of fictional landscapes, whilst dream sequences in his works might be seeded by his remembrances of real places. Magic was never far away. Mystical, otherworldly, characters pepper his works whether it is the mysterious, demonic Mr. Bradley of *The Spring Song*, Ralph, the 'ghost child' of *Young Tom*, the earthly angel Gamelyn or the dream inhabiting sorcerer of *The Retreat*, or the moon worshipping Denis in *The Bracknells*. Just as the real world shifts into the fantastic, so too do characters undergo magical transformations. The aged Stephen in the novel *Uncle Stephen*, disables time and becomes a young boy; the cat Henry, the brooding presence in *The Retreat* metamorphoses into a dark whirling column of elemental force.

Reid studied occultist references such as passages from *The Golden Bough* and the works of Eliphas Lévi in preparing his magical settings, but the natural and the supernatural were an intrinsic part of his vision, and needed little shaping from other authors.

Stephen Gilbert seemed to inherit these themes of magic, transformation and dreamscapes from Reid but invested this inheritance in a new and darker currency. In *The Burnaby Experiments*, the 'Uncle Stephen' character of Burnaby, experimenting in parapsychology and the afterlife, cheats death by entering and possessing his young assistant/apprentice in spirit form. In *The Landslide*, archaic dragons and long dead supernatural creatures re-awaken in a corner of modern Ireland, the landscape too sloughs off cultivation and transforms to a dreamlike primeval state bringing the wrath of the local population. In his unpublished novel 'Granny Carson's Fantasy', the heroine is transformed into a young girl, but whilst enjoying new vitality, suffers sexual assault. The subverting of the natural order in Gilbert's view leads to conflict and pain, not magical release.

MS 44/6/28/32

MS 44/6/16/46



Frazer's Golden Bough

Life time.

In Morocco a fool or pigeon with little red bundle tied to foot. Bundle contains a charm and the charm is kept in motion by the while a corresponding restlessness is kept up in the mind of the person against whom the charm is directed.

people are taken a sleep because his soul is away and night is

in thought to be luring away the soul of its playmate to the

MS 44/3/3 REID'S TYPED NOTES RELATING TO FRAZER'S 'THE GOLDEN BOUGH'

Reid's Muses

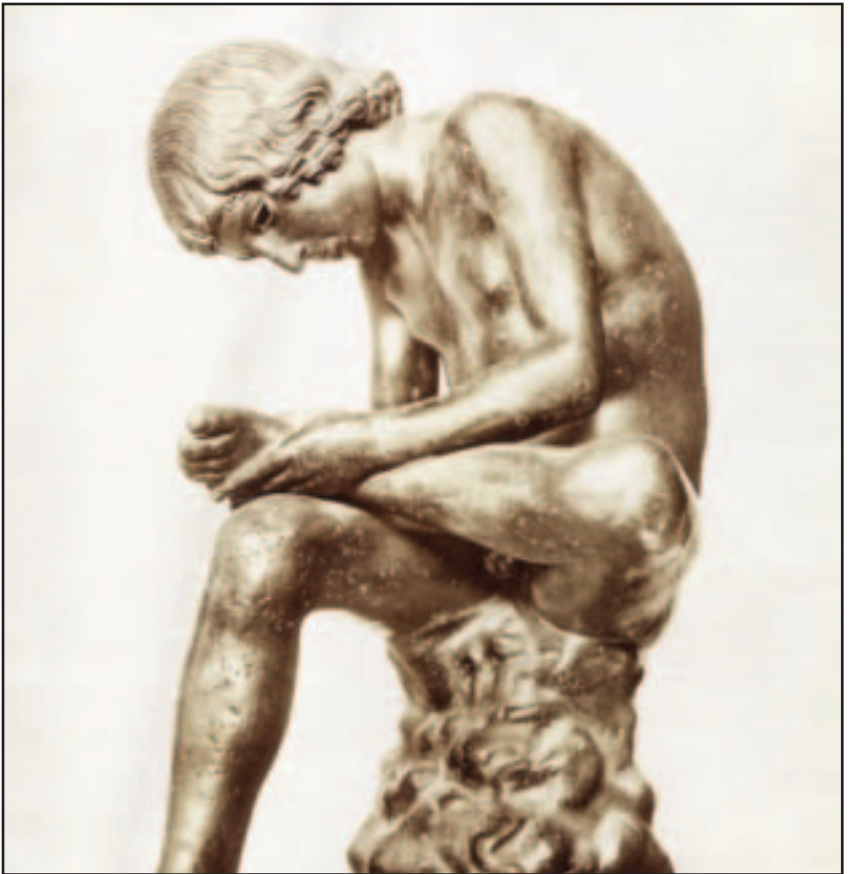
Ancient Greece and Romantic Hellenism

The history and mythology of ancient Greece shaped Reid's thinking about religion, philosophy, ethics, art and platonic love. Reid had no love for Christianity and preferred the vital tales of earthly gods and demigods within Greek literature. Reid's own instinctive paganism drew force from a strong naturalistic sympathy with the Ulster landscape and the animals which lived within it; this landscape he felt was itself imbued with divinity. In *Apostate*, Reid notes that it was in Greek poetry that he discovered a parallel sense of fellowship with the natural world and the furred, scaled or feathered beasts which inhabited it. A wide reading of Greek literature made this vision crisper, and informed many of the scenes in his works where a sense of oneness between man, beast and landscape is evoked. Greece's role as an idea source in his fiction did not end with nature worship. For example, the idealised Grecian relationship between mentor and pupil, notions of rebirth and bodily transformation, references to Grecian gods and the cult of youth are all present in Reid's character, Uncle Stephen. Reid studied the classics at school, but it was during his employ at Musgrave's tea merchants that he immersed himself in Greek literature. The work was not onerous, and the young Reid constructed a den of empty tea chests, hidden away in the corner of a warehouse loft, where he would read Greek poetry and mythology.

Reid was a very competent, but not a great Greek scholar. Frequently, he would translate or transcribe pieces simply for his own amusement. As he was to admit, his translations were 'hammered out with the aid of cribs, precisely in the same spirit as that in which a small boy makes his drawings or his poetry – namely for his own private pleasure, to amuse an idle hour'. Nevertheless he published translations in the form of *Poems from the Greek Anthology* (1943) and his knowledge and feeling for the Greek mythical vision was apparent in his novel *Demophon* (1927). The latter tells the story of Demophon, who is to be made an immortal by the goddess Demeter; the process fails but Reid then chronicles his travels through a magical landscape peopled by demigods, mermen, spirits, witches, philosophers, pirates and various fantastic creatures. Leaving aside the mythical setting here is more than a shade of transmuted autobiography, and Demophon's life parallels many of Reid's own experiences as chronicled in *Apostate*.

As his biographer Russell Birmingham noted 'Greece represented for him all he most admired and everything on which he had most set his heart, and when he did discover it, the revelation enriched his whole life'.

Ancient Greece formed the nub of his spiritual outlook. It put the magical and supernatural into the everyday. As the author's character Sophron says in *Demophon*, 'Religion should be a preparation for life, not a preparation for death'.



REVISED PROOFS
FROM DODD'S PRESS,
DUNDEE PLACE, EDINBURGH

19 AUG 1844

PLEASE CORRECT AND RETURN

PIRATES OF THE SPRING

PART I

I

"I don't know why you should take anything more out of it than that Nature did not intend Beach to be a scholar," said Father O'Brien, in his slow, deliberate fashion, as he set his empty tea-cup down on the little japanned table beside him, and leaned his somewhat portly person back in the wicker-work chair, which, after the manner of its kind, creaked a sharp remonstrance in reply. But Mrs Traill did not seem to see the matter thus. She sighed, and looked extremely pretty and eager for advice, as her eyes rested on the large, rotund, benevolent countenance of her visitor. She was particularly fond of appealing for masculine advice, though she usually failed to follow it when given. But she liked to consider it, to turn it over, to be almost on the point of taking it, to hold it up, as it were, to the light (the light of her own already fixed intention); moreover, she had great confidence in the wisdom of Father O'Brien. His face, rosy-checked and blooming as that of a happy schoolboy; his manner; an air of gentle

1

1

Arcadia in Ulster: Eden and the Pastoral in Reid and Gilbert's Writings.

Reid's writing often features depictions of an earthly rural paradise, intimating a yearning for a 'land of heart's desire'. In his sight, nature has an occasionally glimpsed seed of the divine in it, glistening within humdrum reality. In dream sequences within novels such as *Demophon* or *The Retreat*, the process is taken a step further and characters recreate Arcadia, or are magically transported to Eden. The yearning for a paradise, a place without corruption, or crass materiality, and in which there is freedom from restraint, is a constant presence in Reid's writings. In all art, good and bad, Reid discerned 'that same divine homesickness, that same longing for an Eden from which each one of us is exiled'. This is nostalgia for a golden age in its most literal form.

Reid's vision of paradise may have been pastoral but it was not cloying or over garlanded. It was a vital, elemental place. In *Apostate*, in rich prose pictures, Reid offer his glimpsed remembrances of being transported to an Arcadia in the rural fringes of Belfast. Reid recalls one afternoon on the banks of the River Lagan, with an almost hallucinatory force:

'It was hot and still. The breathless silence seemed unnatural; seemed, as I lay motionless in the tangled grass, like a bridge that reached back across into the heart of some dim antiquity. I had a feeling of uneasiness, of unrest, though I lay so still – of longing and excitement and expectation. . . I drew my breath quickly; there was a drumming in my ears; I knew that the green woodland before me was going to split asunder, to swing back on either side like two great painted doors. . .'

In his fiction, Reid would frequently craft scenes of a raw Eden; in *Young Tom*, the eponymous hero listens to

'the myriad voices of nature. . . calling – whispering in the trees that overhung and cast deep pools of shadow on the sunlit road – calling more loudly and imperatively from bird and beast and insect. Everywhere was life and the eager joy of life. The very air seemed alive, and from the earth a living strength was pushing upwards and outwards – visible in each separate blade of grass and delicate meadow flower no less than in the great chestnut tree standing at the corner where the road turned.'

For Reid, this Arcadia was embedded in the everyday, but was also tantalisingly out of reach. His fiction served to recover and explore it.



MS 44/7/1



MS 45 STEPHEN GILBERT ARCHIVE

A Writer's Familiars: Animism and Anthropomorphism in Reid's Writings

From childhood Reid had developed a love of animals. His bulldogs Pan and Remus, Nyx the terrier, the sheep dog Roger, and Puss the cat, feature in his correspondence and autobiography, as Reid notes their fidelity, mischievousness and warmth. Reid movingly records the death of Pan in his short story 'A Boy and His Dog' printed in his collection *A Garden by the Sea*, and the dog also appears in *Peter Waring*. The writer was entirely upfront about the principal value he placed on his pets in the second volume of his autobiography *Private Road*; his friendship with animals was 'far less disappointing' ultimately, than his encounters with humanity. Although animals provided no conversation, 'on the other hand, there was no failure, no change'. The simplicity, fidelity and unchanging nature of animal affection provided the writer with a comfort he found lacking in the more complicated world of adult relationships.

Real life encounters with animals certainly served as models for the beast characters within his fiction, and the novel *The Retreat* provides several examples. A real life beach encounter with an unkempt but friendly hound was to create 'Chrysanthemum' the faithful mongrel companion to Tom Barber. Reid took a photograph of this 'Chrysanthemum' which survives within his personal papers and described the animal as 'the 'most prehistoric dog I have ever beheld, with a fringe over his eyes, and a coat so densely matted that small birds might have been tempted to build their nests therein'. The implicitly supernatural cat Henry in the same novel was part modelled on Stephen Gilbert's family cat, and also on a scene witnessed one holiday in England. Reid had passed by a derelict graveyard in which 'seated on each of these tombstones was a cat. The park was deserted, the cats were motionless, and in the still and fading autumn light, the whole picture seemed drenched in a kind of sorcery. . . .'

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Beasts and mysticism mix easily within Reid's fiction. The author readily infused pagan and ancient Grecian notions of animism, the belief system that attributes souls to animals and plants, through works such as *Demophon*, *The Retreat*, or *The Spring Song*; the protagonist of the latter, a young boy named Grif can hear 'whispering voices' in the pines and because of his loneliness, develops a 'fellowship with birds and beasts', his most devoted wish being to understand the language of the forest creatures. The black cat Henry in *The Retreat* is an animal spirit of a darker kind. On one level, he serves as a foreboding symbol of the end of childhood innocence; on another he is Tom Barber's familiar, a demonic animal spirit designed to serve its

owner as companion, guide or muse. Henry may at times be a nuzzling pet, but in the borderline between Tom's imagination and reality he transmogrifies into an elemental force, in one scene exploding into Tom's classroom as a darkness 'thickening at the centre, concentrating in a spiral twirling column, through which there blazed two white eyes of fire'. The familiar's hypnotic manifestation causes one schoolboy to flap his arms, and make bird cries – he has briefly fallen prey to the animal's spell.

But it is in *Young Tom*, that Reid most successfully makes use of the animism motif, and creatures are widely anthropomorphised. Everywhere in the animal kingdom, young Tom Barber humanises creatures, finding sentience and personality; the bee is a 'good natured person', whilst an angered swarm of bees, flows outward like a gaseous malevolent genie; beetles are affectionate, mice have family conversations, and rats talk. In a dreamlike sequence Tom is transported to an Eden of talking beasts, complete with a coiling, loquacious serpent.

Reid's fellowship with the animal kingdom, both in life and imagination, combine with his spiritual paganism, and longing for dream worlds, to create in his fiction a sense of oneness in nature. The author readily identified with the freedom and uncomplicated nature of animal life; as he put it in a letter to Gilbert 'More than ever I feel that I was given the wrong shape, and was intended to go on all fours'.



'CHRYSANTHEMUM' MS 44/7/4



REID AND HIS BULLDOG PAN MS 44/7/4

‘Tear Him Up!’ Animals in Stephen Gilbert’s Fiction

Gilbert followed Reid in his use of the animistic motif; animals would exhibit intelligent behaviour, personality traits, and act as ‘familiars’ to human characters.

Initially, in *The Landslide*, this followed a pattern similar to his mentor’s. In the latter tale fantastic creatures from a primeval age, including a sentient dragon, are awoken in our time; the creatures are peaceful and friendly, and their hatching, following the landslide of the title, presages a change in the local environment as the weather beaten valleys of the Irish countryside become tangled with fantastic jungle flora. Within this setting the young hero Wolfe finds a cheerful doglike creature which he christens Procyon. Thus the familiar Reid motifs of sentient beasts, faithful pets, lush paradises and youthful innocents are all drawn together. But for Reid, such visions and animal fellowships largely signalled release from the complexities of the modern world – instead in Gilbert’s vision the arrival of the fantastic creatures leads to fear, anxiety and rage amongst the local populace; Father Binyon viewing the creatures as Satan spawn tries to exorcise the animals, the rest of the populace simply wish to exterminate them. Gilbert returns to this negative comparison between ‘civilised’ man and sentient beast in *Monkeyface*. The novel also combines Reid’s motifs of childhood and lost paradise; the child is an intelligent ape species removed from a jungle Eden by an explorer and transplanted to Belfast for study. The creature is taught to speak, but the hand of man is a corrupting one; his new owner Sebastian Browne merely seeks ways to exploit and exhibit the intelligent creature as a freak. Although in possession of a sentient offshoot of humanity, Browne prefers to bully it into parroting phrases such as ‘No Surrender’ and ‘Up Ulster’, than engage in any attempt to understand him.

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But it is in *Ratman’s Notebooks* that we most clearly see the inversion of Reid’s animism. The book is structured as a series of journal entries by an unnamed protagonist, later referred to as the ‘Ratman’. Ratman lives in a crumbling house with his aged mother, and works in a lowly position in a firm which his family used to own. He is bullied and mistreated by Jones, his usurping and avaricious boss, and has no friends to speak of. Ratman’s age is never given but it is clear that he is not a youth but a ‘boy-man’, bereft of life experience, confidence and socially unskilled. The Ratman does however adopt a colony of rats in his decrepit garden. He trains these to do simple tricks, but two in particular, whom he names ‘Socrates’ and ‘Ben’ show remarkable intelligence, and with their assistance the training becomes more complicated and serves a darker purpose. Ratman initially uses his army of rodents to create mischievous havoc, then uses them to steal, before finally

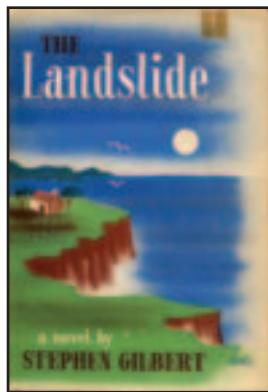
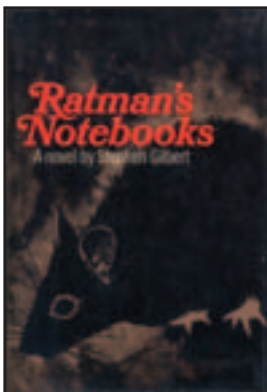
preparing them for 'Jones Day' when the beasts are unleashed on his obnoxious employer. With the command 'Tear Him Up!', the rats rend the flesh from Jones's body, but Nature bites back. The animals corrupted by the hand of man, and sensing the Ratman's own hostility, ultimately turn on their master. Reid's talking rat of the pastoral *Young Tom*, has become a legion imbued with vengeful cunning.



The Reid inspired fellowship between innocent protagonist and natural creature is thus torn apart, and reassembled in a grubbier, malevolent pattern. Ratman is not an innocent, but a cynical social inadequate, with psychopathic tendencies. He fantasises about being a 'god' over the rodents, and dresses up in a rat mask whilst leading his robberies, masquerading as a kind of surreal comic book super villain. The intelligent rat Socrates, despite being a favoured companion, dies through Ratman's negligence, whilst Ben, more readily approximating to a demonic familiar, leads the revolt against their master. In Gilbert's animistic world, man's influence is venal and corrupting, and his Eden is dotted with beady, cruel eyes.

Fist published in 1968, *Ratman's Notebooks* was a commercial success, perhaps capturing the fashion at the time for first-person narratives involving youthful alienated anti-heroes. The Ratman sits somewhere between the droogs of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* and B S Johnson's vengeful office boy in *Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry*. The story was first begun in 1939, but was interrupted by the war; it also part evolved from a poem written by Gilbert in 1941 entitled 'The Rats', in which he described the clawing and scratching of rats as they moved about the darkness of his army billet.

The book spawned two Hollywood film adaptations, as *Willard*, in 1971 and 2003, whilst *Ben* (1972) saw Gilbert's rat character re-surface in a horror sequel. The theme tune became a hit single for Michael Jackson.





Class Decline and Conflict

Both Reid and Gilbert shared another theme within their body of work – that of class decline and inter-class tensions. Themes of social fracturing, shifting power relations, and a frayed gentility, somewhat smeared and careworn, pervade many of their works. Middle class pretensions are also glimpsed under a literary magnifying glass.

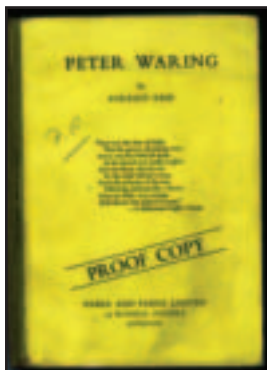
In *The Bracknells*, and the later revision *Denis Bracknell*, Reid picks apart the philistine, constricting values of a well to do puritanical family of Ulster Presbyterians; the values of the upwardly assertive mercantile classes, embodied in the boorish, and morally hypocritical father, stifle the life of the sensitive son.

In *Peter Waring*, class self loathing is replaced by class confusion and ambiguity. The young Peter's literary inclinations and sensitivity sit uncomfortably with his own father's threadbare lower middle class position in life; he also exhibits a distaste for his 'cheap and gaudy' lodgings with his Belfast relatives, whose moral outlook he believes is no less second hand and affected. Yet Peter feels awkward and ashamed of his own class origins when visiting with his upper middle class friends the Carrrolls, even if he shares their intellectual outlook. But it is for the lower middle and working classes that Reid creates a 'specific kind of purgatory', in the words of critic John Wilson Foster. The make do and mend gentility of the barely middle class, is only exceeded by his grimy sketches of working class Belfast life, when Reid condescends to picture it. In his first novel *The Kingdom of Twilight* (1904), Reid depicts a world illuminated by the 'dull yellow light of the gas lamp' in which shuffling corner boys, ragged children, and the 'puffed, bloated faces' of street walkers peer out. The Edwardian promenade thus takes in the industrial underworld.

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Foster detects a snobbishness, conscious or otherwise, within Reid's characterizations. Reid's class ambiguities, prejudices and sense of social descent can be explained by his own family upbringing. Reid's mother was the last survivor of the Shropshire Parr family who could trace itself back to Katherine Parr, the last wife of Henry VIII. His father had been a bankrupted ship owner, who became the manager of a firm in Belfast. The father died early in Reid's childhood, and although the young Forrester was raised in Mount Charles, a highly respectable part of Belfast, Reid is at pains to point out that the large family were often forced to economise on meals and transport. The family's social station was perceived to be on the slide, and as Foster argues, Reid sometimes appears to have inherited a 'snobbery of decayed gentility' from his mother.

Gilbert too reflects a concern with class tensions and social decay. His novel *The Burnaby Experiments* features several examples of a stagnating Ulster Protestant middle class, hit hard by economic circumstance; In *Monkeyface*, this theme is carried further; the intelligent ape Bimbo is the subject of schemes by Sebastian Browne, the degenerate remnant of an upper middle class Victorian family. Browne is reduced to living in a small part of the once grand house, and hopes to sell Bimbo for exhibition. A once vibrant mercantile family, which indulged in the exploration and expansion of the British Empire, is reduced to a resentful shut-in desiring to make money out of a freak show. Class degeneracy and resentment reaches its nadir in *Ratman's Notebooks*. Ratman's family once owned the firm in which he is employed as an overworked, underpaid, and bullied office boy. The once grand family home is decayed. Following the death of his mother, Ratman is occasionally reduced to a bread and water diet, and resorts to larceny to survive. He fails to stand up to his overbearing, avaricious boss and is dismissed as having 'potential nil' by a firm of consultants called into streamline the firm. Middle class society has turned on the Ratman, and reduced him to the status of non person. But the Ratman is not entirely deserving of sympathy. He cultivates violent class divisions and hierarchies within his rat army, between the 'scaly tails' and the smarter 'furry tails', and sometimes deals violently with animal insubordination. Later, when the Ratman inherits money and assumes leadership of the firm, he is contemptuous of his former colleagues demands for fairer wages. He also plans to abandon, or drown, his rat minions. The rats, both scaly and furry tail, unite and reduce him to a non person in the most literal sense, by leaving no trace of his devoured body.



MS 44/2/15



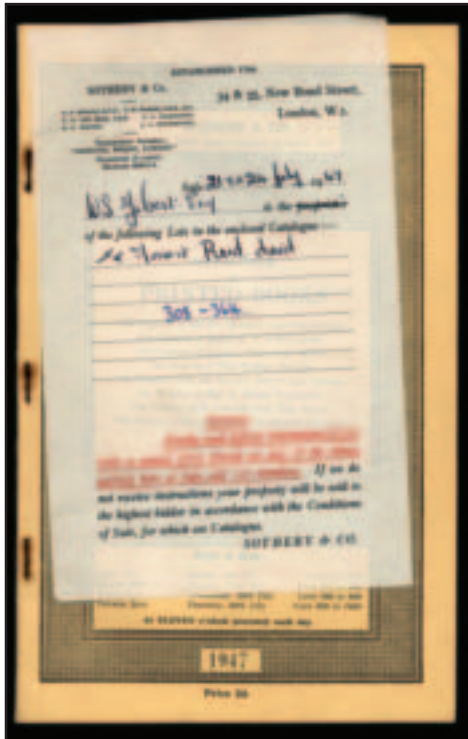
REID AND HIS MOTHER CIRCA 1890
MS 44/7/4



MS 45/2 STEPHEN GILBERT ARCHIVE

A Bookman's World

Forrest Reid had collected books for decades, and by the end of his years, the bookshelves of his front room overflowed from floor to ceiling, and had begun to occupy positions along the staircase, and even in the kitchen, of what was a modest semi-detached house. Reid also demonstrated the true bibliophile's love of books, not simply for their content, but as material objects. He would often assiduously bind books in thick paper to protect them from damage, a habit he acquired whilst living in rather tight circumstances in rooms on the Dublin Road. The writer V S Pritchett recalls that Reid was required to bind his thousands of books in paper covers, as industrial soot and dust from passing traffic would hang low, and be blown into his draughty flat.



BOOK PLATE

Reid maintained a meticulous catalogue of his books, spanning the years from 1909 to the early 1940s. The catalogue itself is a large volume comprising 400 pages. There are particularly strong collections listed for Max Beerbohm, Greek classical authors, Joseph Conrad, Walter de la Mare, Flaubert, Anatole France, Thomas Hardy, John Hampson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Aldous Huxley, Henry James, Sheridan Le Fanu, Arthur Machen, Maupassant, Andrew Lang, Somerville and Ross, Robert Louis Stevenson, J M Synge, Turgenev, Anthony Trollope, Mark Twain, and W B Yeats amongst others. The catalogue also lists books relating to famous and infamous criminal trials. There are also over 270 listings in the catalogue section 'Woodcuts of the Sixties' relating to illustrated works from the period of the 1850s to early 1900s.

It was not simply a love of literature which fuelled his acquisition of such a large library; since childhood Reid had enjoyed the acquisitive rush enjoyed in forming various collections - such as posters, woodcut prints, and stamps. Reid wrote of his 'wolf like prowling among the second hand stalls and stores' and it is evident that he loved the excitement of tracking down valued works, and even hinted at an enjoyment of somewhat duplicitous behaviour in sourcing and acquiring material.

His collection was also swelled by his long career as a book reviewer and critic, writing for national and local newspapers such as the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Northern Whig*, in particular. Reid's reviews often reflected his own tastes; he had little time for writers of the 1920s and 1930s, with the exception of de la Mare, Forster and Yeats, and Reid freely admitted that he was not really a creature of his own generation. Occasionally however, he did advise and nurture younger novelists, such as John Hampson Simpson and Stephen Gilbert. But Reid could reserve the sharpest criticism for himself, and in an inversion of his bibliophilia, but a utilisation of his book finding skills, would seek out and surreptitiously destroy copies of his early works, including library copies, which he considered 'false starts'.

Reid's love of literature fuelled a criticism which expanded beyond reviews and essays, and he was to write highly regarded critical studies of W B Yeats and Walter de la Mare. The latter was a good friend and correspondent of long standing.

Forrest Reid and Art

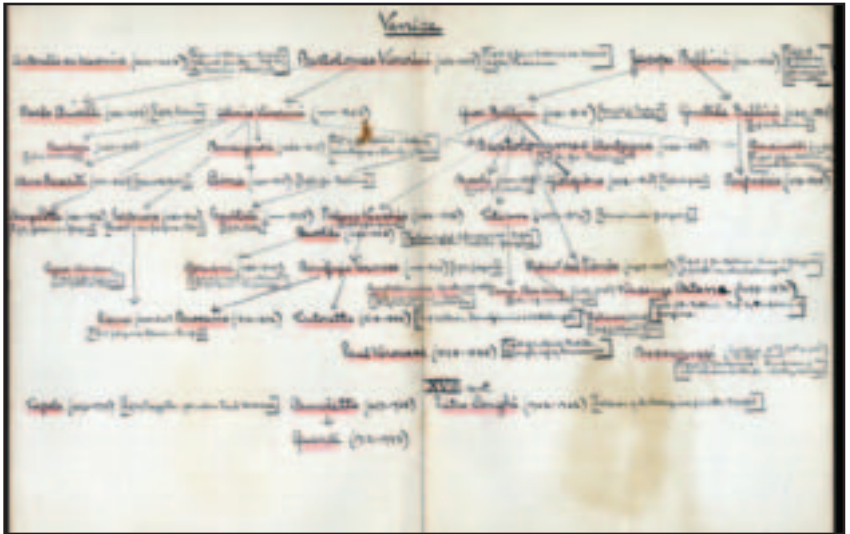
Reid had several collecting passions, from books to philately. It is little surprise, that a writer who painted such thick, lush, and elemental prose pictures should also have a deep interest in the visual medium, and he developed through his life a large collection of proofs, postcards, prints and clippings that depicted a wide range of artistic representations.

Reid had toured Europe, and was particularly keen to visit the art galleries and museums of Italy, Germany and the Low Countries. He made copious notes on the artworks he viewed, including constructing diagrammatic 'family trees' of artists connections to particular areas and schools of painting, and built up a series of scrapbooks relating to fine art from various periods.

But his strongest artistic interest was in woodcut illustrations of the mid to late nineteenth century; as a boy he had discovered a horde of Victorian periodicals in the attic of the family home, and had been struck by the quality of the illustrated prints therein. His collecting impulse was fired by these woodcut illustrations, many of which had been produced by the leading figures within the pre-Raphaelite movement, and he lovingly clipped and organised them in a series of folders. For Reid, their greatest strength was the way in which these illustrations 'accepted life as it was and turned it into beauty; they invested the most homely materials with a delicate and poetic charm'. He added to this collection through the decades, and he became an acknowledged authority on the subject publishing *Illustrators of the Sixties* in 1928.

As well as collecting simply for pleasure, or the purposes of art criticism, it seems Forrest Reid also used some items from this huge collection of images as visual hooks and templates for characters and settings in his fiction. One item, MS 44/6/16/33, features an image of a young boy which, according to his notation, Reid used as a visual model for the character of Tom Barber.

Many of the images are extracted from illustrated magazines of the mid to late Victorian period, such as *The Graphic*, *The Illustrated London News* and *Graphic America*. Periodicals such as these incorporated many examples of the wood engravings Forrest Reid particularly admired. These illustrations are varied in theme and relate not only to nineteenth century life in Britain and Ireland, but also feature images from Asia and Europe – including events such as the Franco Prussian War and the Paris Commune. Very many of the illustrations originally accompanied stories, melodramas and historical fiction serialised in popular magazines of the time.



MS 44/3/14/1



MS 44/6/1



MS 44/6/1



MS 44/3/4

Youth and Friendship

Perhaps Reid's greatest enjoyment was that of friendship. The author corresponded widely, had many friends, and enjoyed hosting visitors at his home. The Ulster novelist George Buchanan noted that Reid was a great and natural conversationalist, but one who abhorred small talk, or to put it in Reid's own words 'unless a person can talk to you out of his own guts as it were, what's the use of meeting?' Reid placed the greatest value on friendships showing openness, loyalty and affection. The theme of friendship fascinated him as a writer; most particularly the intense, passionate, uncomplicated friendships and camaraderie of childhood and adolescence. It was to childhood that Reid was to return again and again in his stories; the boy heroes endlessly in pursuit of the simple joys of youth, and facing the anxieties and fears of growing up. It was Reid's conviction that the 'years of childhood, boyhood and adolescence are the most significant. What follows is chiefly a logical development – the child being father to the man'.

Reid's preoccupation with childhood in his writings and its seemingly simpler relationships, drives, and diversions was something of a literary obsession, an outward manifestation of what Reid himself called his 'mysterious case of arrested development'. It certainly struck at an early age. In *Apostate*, Reid recounts how the thought of his approaching seventeenth birthday 'depressed him for hours', as he feared it would separate him 'hopelessly and for ever from the past' catapulting him into a teenage world of affected grown



up manners, preening and running after girls. In part his absorption with the world of childhood was a simple wish to turn back the years, and return to a lost paradise of wonder, intense friendships, and unconditional love. If it could not be found in adult life it could be recreated in memory. But his work is more than the penning of wish fulfilment. His youthful characters must also often deal with loneliness, lack of understanding, loss, and anxiety. This should not surprise us. Reid's own childhood was not idyllic; his father died when he was a child, his mother remained emotionally remote and the surest source of love in his life, his nurse, was ripped from his life by the family's declining fortunes. The scholar Brian Taylor notes another strong undercurrent in Reid's handling of the theme of youth; that of return and revision. His preoccupation with childhood is not merely a basking in nostalgia, but an attempt to pick away at the fabric of the memory, and discern what went wrong, why things happened as they did. Returning and revising is a thread most readily apparent in his autobiography *Apostate*, but also weaves through much of his fiction from *The Garden God* to *Uncle Stephen*. The chronology of publication of the Tom Barber trilogy, clearly reflects this need to disable time, and spiral backward; in this trilogy *Uncle Stephen*, the final part, was published first. *The Retreat*, and *Young Tom*, published later, chronicle successively younger periods of Tom Barber's life.

Reid's insistence on peeling away the layers, back to youth, was perhaps ultimately based on his desire to untangle what fed the desires, drives and anxieties of later life, how the child fathered the man. Reid's own sexuality, frustrated and criminalised, may have been the underlying tension which fuelled this adult retrospection.



Kenneth Hamilton

Kenneth Hamilton was a twelve year old schoolboy, whose parents lived not far from Reid in the Rosetta area of south Belfast. Reid first met Hamilton in Belvoir Park, during the summer of 1916, and the author became a friend of the family, even holidaying with them. At the time of their first meeting, Reid was working on the story *The Spring Song*, a tale of childhood, interspersed with darker tones of loneliness and fearful imaginings, and here in reality, was a boy whom Reid admired for his sensitivity and imagination, but also felt concern for, as Hamilton often suffered bullying. Reid enthused about his friendship with young Kenneth to many of his friends, including E M Forster, who wrote of his own concern about the bullying Hamilton was receiving at school. Although Hamilton's imagination was fired by his collaboration with Reid on *Kenneth's Magazine*, the boy had little interest or ability in scholarly or practical matters. After Hamilton left school, Reid used his influence to secure several junior positions for the boy, all with little success. Eventually, Hamilton joined the merchant navy as a cadet, and after several voyages, travelled in Australia. He continued to write to Reid, including sending several of his own poems, but eventually the correspondence tailed off. What happened to Kenneth Hamilton remains a mystery; a letter sent to him was returned unopened and stamped 'deceased'. Enquiries revealed that Hamilton was presumed dead. One day he had ridden out alone into the Australian bush, and was never heard of again. Reid was heartbroken, and gathering together all of Kenneth's youthful writings, he visited the young man's mother, and the two poured over his stories, essays and poems. One of Reid's biographers, Brian Taylor has noted the special bond between Reid and the boy's mother, forged by their shared adoration of Kenneth.

Kenneth's Magazine was a home produced magazine, principally produced as recreation by Hamilton. Reid contributed many pieces of his own and acted as 'honorary assistant editor'. Other contributors included literary friends of Reid's, such as Herbert Moore Pim, and school friends and relations of Hamilton. The magazine appeared at irregular intervals between 1917 and 1919, and only one copy of each magazine was ever produced as befits its status as youthful entertainment. Nevertheless, the magazine was obviously treasured by Forrest Reid, not simply as a remembrance of Hamilton, who died young, but also because of the vibrancy and lack of affectation of the boy's writing, as Reid saw it.

The contributions to this journal were either written directly onto the pages or typed on separate sheets and cut and pasted in. The size and format differed from issue to issue but invariably involved the use of a jotter.

There are copious illustrations, both on the cover and through main text; some are hand drawn illustrations and cartoons, whilst others comprise images cut from advertisements. The draughtsmanship of at least one contributor, R J Wright, is of an obviously high quality. Textual content included poetry and verse, short sketches and stories. These latter often comprised many of a fanciful adventurous type such as the serials 'Captain Salisbury' and 'A Rebel's Love', the latter detailing an Irish Republican rising in Belfast by the 'Sinn Féin Regiment'. Hamilton had a wicked, and humorous sense of adventure, and his stories feature devils, burglars, privateers and one Will Murdock, who sports a 'fanged arm'. One character, the adventurer Captain Salisbury, even resorts to satanic ritual and the fake invocation of demons to keep his men in order. Hamilton also wrote short dramatic mimes, and reviews of various works also formed part of the magazine.



MS 44/8/4



MS 44/7/3



MS 44/7/3

Mentor and Pupil – The Writer as Guide and Protégé

Another strong theme within Reid's fiction is the exploration of the strong bond between mentor and pupil. As Reid's biographer Brian Taylor notes, the 'uncle-doctor' figure is a recurring character within Reid's work. This representation of the learned elder occurs in *The Kingdom of Twilight* in the form of Doctor Grayson, Father O'Brien in *Pirates of the Spring*, Doctor O'Neill in *The Spring Song*, Doctor Birch in *The Bracknells*, Mrs. Carroll in *Following Darkness*, and of course Uncle Stephen, in the novel of the same name. As Russell Burlingham, another biographer of Reid's, has noted, these mentor figures perform different dramatic functions. They act as a focus on which the youthful boy heroes of his stories can turn to for clarity and advice, and they act as a means for advancing the plot, by virtue of their intervention. The tension between master and pupil, was also a theme frequently appearing in the literature and philosophy of Ancient Greece, which would have increased its appeal to Reid, given his abiding interest in that period of civilisation. But this use of the mentor and pupil theme might also act as an objectification of Reid's own inner desires; a fictional wish fulfilment of his own boyhood, and adult, needs. As a child, Reid lost his father, and found his mother unresponsive – he longed for a loving, guiding adult. As an adult, he tried to act out this role in his own dealings with those younger than himself. His support and affection for the young Kenneth Hamilton epitomises this, but there were other examples such as fondness for Desmond Montgomery, the son of a neighbourhood family with whom Reid was friendly. Perhaps the greatest mentor and pupil relationship that existed in Reid's life was that which developed between himself and his protégé, the young author Stephen Gilbert.

Reid and Gilbert became friends in 1931, when the nineteen year old was first considering what career to embark upon. Reid encouraged the young man to write, and although Gilbert's first novelistic attempt *The Assailants* failed to find a publisher, support from both Reid and E M Forster, ensured that his next story *The Landslide*, saw print in 1943. In Gilbert's dedication to Reid in the book, he referred to himself as the 'friend and pupil' of the older writer, which greatly pleased Reid. But the friendship, although long lasting, was not always a successful one. Reid, whom it may be guessed harboured a deep, unrequited love for Gilbert, could be a most possessive and waspish friend, and could be thrown into a temper by Gilbert's love affairs with women. Although he enjoyed developing Gilbert's talents, he would have preferred it if the mentor-pupil bond had remained static, encapsulated and unchanging. Gilbert, writing in 1976, stated that throughout their friendship his own feelings for Reid were mixed:

'Time and again, I wished he would take himself out of my life, that he had never come into it. I felt bitterly that he had stolen my youth. I knew that he had given me a great deal in exchange. I carry these gifts with me yet. And for good or bad he influenced my writing. For good or bad. . .'

Gilbert too was to take up the theme of the tension between mentor and pupil in his own writing. In *The Landslide*, the relationship between the young hero Wolfe, and his kindly grandfather is purely in the spirit of Reid. But by the time Gilbert wrote *The Burnaby Experiments* (1952), he has altered and twisted this theme to a darker pattern. In the latter book, Gilbert has borrowed much of the dramatic template from *Uncle Stephen*, and added to the character of the occult scientist Burnaby, some of the traits of Reid himself. Here the mentor-pupil relationship ends tragically. An experiment runs awry, and the spirit of the dead scientist possesses his young pupil; the latter drowns himself, the mental torture of being 'inhabited' proving too much. In *Ratman's Notebooks*, the narrator takes the role of mentor, and the intelligent rats that of pupils. The outcome of this teacher and pupil relationship moves from the tragic to the horrific – the mentor plays a corrupting role, and is ultimately cruel and neglectful to his 'pupils', who turn on him in a vengeful fury. While Reid viewed the roles of mentor and pupil in a somewhat idealised fashion, Gilbert's feelings were mixed. For him, selfishness and the need for control could adulterate love and guidance.



MS 44/7/3 GILBERT, REID AND FRIEND

Sexuality and the Life and Writings of Forrest Reid

Reid was homosexual, and several of his novels deal with bonds of affection between young men, although that love is seldom made explicit, let alone consummated. This pattern followed on from his own youthful experience. As a young man, Reid had fallen in love with a work colleague Andrew Rutherford, and although Andrew was for a time a close friend, Reid's own feelings were never reciprocated. Similarly, in later years his love for Stephen Gilbert was to remain unrequited, and as his correspondence shows, his own possessiveness and frustrations could manifest as sulks and quarrels, prompted by Gilbert's relations with women.

Reid was not actively homosexual, and in fact evidenced a dislike of homosexuals who acted in a self-conscious fashion. More than this, he considered the sexual act, whether heterosexual or homosexual, degrading and vulgar. Gilbert asserts that Reid's greatest distaste was reserved for female sexuality, in part caused by a Victorian upbringing which emphasised puritanical primness, one which caused some confusion in the young Forrest's mind about the female shape and biology. As a child Reid also suffered from rather surreal sexual teasing by female friends of his sister. To a sensitive child like the young Forrest this must have appeared quite horrific.

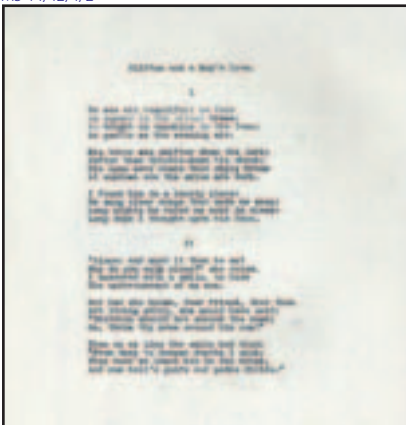
In any event, many of the relationships in Reid's novels are suffused with a homoerotic tone; heterosexual relationships are handled less capably. His focus remains on love between males, and particularly youthful, platonic love.

As such his writings gathered interest from others who were homosexual, at a time when such inclinations were not simply disapproved of, but considered immoral and criminal. Correspondence to Reid thus reflects different facets of homosexual life in the early to mid twentieth century. One correspondent may furtively include a reference to homoerotic Grecian poetry as a signal, whilst another literary correspondent, openly 'out', cheerfully brags about how his companion is playfully distracting him with spicy selections from an erotic text, as he pens a Christmas card to Reid. Forrest Reid may not have approved - but his archive sheds light on differing attitudes and mores within the homosexual community of the time. Expressing homosexual themes was clearly problematic for authors. Forster wrote on several occasions to Reid, about his own novel chronicling male love, *Maurice*, and although Forster showed the manuscript to Reid in 1915, he did not publish it until after his death in 1971. Reid would prove even more guarded than Forster in explicitly exploring this theme. His own novel of a thwarted homosexual relationship *The Green Avenue*, never developed beyond the

planning stage. In his experience, he had reason to fear censure from even the most literary of figures. Reid had dedicated *The Garden God*, an early novel charting loss and platonic love between youths, to his favourite author Henry James. There was however a subdued eroticism sunk into the tale and James reacted angrily, breaking off his correspondence with Reid. The incident greatly affected the young writer. Reid had already suppressed his own self composed verse 'Dedication and Envoy' from the title page of the published version of *The Garden God*, perhaps concerned at its signalling of homoerotic content, however mild. Yet the novel had still broken apart his friendship with the writer he most admired. Reid could not shy away from exploring the theme of male love and relationships, but its novelisation would require a degree of screening, however thin.



MS 44/12/1/2



MS 44/5/2



MS/44/12/3/9

Literary Legacies

Forrest Reid received glowing recognition in 1944, his novel *Young Tom* winning the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for the best work of fiction in that year. To E M Forster, Reid was simply 'the most important man in Belfast', yet as Forster noted, that city 'knew him not'. There is obvious exaggeration in both statements. Reid was awarded an honorary doctorate by Queen's University in 1933, and local memorial events and exhibitions commemorated the man and his work in the 1950s and 1970s. But few followed Forster in giving him the status of a truly great writer. Reid certainly avoided literary coteries, even local ones, but much of this lack of recognition resulted from the fact that few of his novels were commercial successes. The public imagination was seldom caught. He remained something of an 'author's author', as Stephen Gilbert noted in 1952:

'Who reads him? You won't find his books in the tuppenny and sixpenny lending libraries; but they are in places where such books are not. Young men at the universities read him and are enchanted by him. Writers read him. Generally I think the people who read him are people who themselves influence a greater public'

Whilst an elitist view, there remained truth in this. His critical reputation was further sapped as its perceived feyness and escapism jarred uneasily with the preoccupations of Irish fiction in the late twentieth century. But given his recurring themes of magic, dreamscapes, animal spirits, childhood, myth, and ritual, we might guess that his reputation is ripe for revival in a popular culture which now shows much interest in similar characters and themes created by Tolkien, J K Rowling and Philip Pullman.

Whilst his works have only been intermittently in print in the decades following his death, from the late 1970s onwards there emerged greater critical interest in his work. Some critics were drawn to examine the psychological aspects behind Reid's work, but in any event, Reid's own lucid rhythmic prose, its technical craft, will ensure a continuing interest in his work.

In some respects, Gilbert's work has seen more commercial success and public attention. His novel *Ratman's Notebooks*, was adapted for the screen as the Hollywood film *Willard* in 1971, and a re-make also appeared under the same title in 2003. This novel with its story of a lonely, violent, outsider chimed immediately with a cultural fashion of the 1960s and 1970s for outcasts and anti-heroes, reacting with rage against the world about them. But *Ratman's Notebooks* remained the zenith of Gilbert's literary success, his other works such as *The Burnaby Experiments*, *Monkeyface* and *Bombardier*, though much more conspicuously modern than Reid's

works, have also remained conspicuously out of print. Given his darker take on some of the themes he inherited from Reid, perhaps his works, most of all, are ready for a new audience.

The archives of the personal papers of Stephen Gilbert and Forrest Reid not only reveal the wider influences and development of each of these writers, but also expose the tensions which existed between these two literary friends, and the creative inheritance passed between mentor and pupil. It was a creative gene rich and well crafted, and after generational mutation, as sharp as a rat's tooth.



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