EDWARD GARNETT (1868-1937)

It was, surely, a remarkable coincidence that brought some of the most influential literary figures of the time to live in or near Crockham Hill, little more than a country mile of one another, in the early part of the 20th century.

There was Churchill at Chartwell – not ‘only’ a politician and statesman, but also a journalist and historian who came to Chartwell in 1922 and won the Nobel Prize for Literature thirty years later. There was E.V.Lucas, the prolific essayist, travel writer, biographer and poet, who lived on Froghole Lane. But first of all it was Edward Garnett, who, in the 1890s, built a home on the edge of the woods below Kent Hatch, where he nurtured the talent of some of the finest writers of the age, while his wife Constance was busy translating into English some of the greatest works of Russian literature.

Born in January 1868, Edward William Garnett was the third of Richard and Narney Garnett’s six children, and it is hardly surprising that he should grow to become such a ‘bookish’ individual, since he was not only brought up in a house surrounded by books, but was familiar almost from birth with the literary men and women who were part of the family’s regular acquaintances, for his father was a noted biographer and poet, as well as assistant librarian at the British Museum.

By all accounts Edward’s formal education was undistinguished, but after leaving the City of London School at sixteen he set about improving himself by devouring as many books as he could – for two years he made no attempt to find work, for the mould appears to have already been set in which he barely had an existence beyond the written word.

But when he was eighteen he met and fell in love with Constance Black, the daughter of a Brighton solicitor, who had moved to London and was then appointed as librarian at the People’s Palace Library. Six years older than Edward, Constance was a political activist who was soon taking the tall, gangly young man with the pale blue eyes that flashed behind his spectacles, to Fabian and Socialist meetings - none of which he took at all seriously.

The two had a relaxed attitude towards the conventions and accepted morality of the Victorian era, and were soon living together before eventually committing themselves to marriage at the Brighton Registry Office in August 1889.

By this time Edward was working for the publisher T Fisher Unwin, who initially took him on simply to wrap parcels! But once he had a foot in the door of the publishing world, the unqualified young man suddenly blossomed as his

true vocation was revealed, for in the vast knowledge of books and appreciation of literature in all its forms that he had already accumulated, he had unwittingly developed a talent for spotting emerging writers – a talent that would earn his reputation as the publisher's editor and 'reader' *par excellence*.

Among the many authors he discovered, nurtured or befriended, were Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence, the nature writer W.H. Hudson, John Galsworthy, the poet Edward Thomas, Ford Madox Ford and Stephen Crane. He also championed the work of American poet, Robert Frost, and was partly responsible for getting T.E. Lawrence's work in print.

Garnett stayed with Fisher Unwin for about ten years before moving to Heinemann's; later still he worked for Gerald Duckworth, then Jonathan Cape, discovering, moulding and guiding some of the finest literary talent around. As a result his list of contacts and correspondents expanded to include such diverse figures as Somerset Maugham, John Masefield, the Russian writer, philosopher and anarchist Peter Kropotkin, and the revolutionary Sergey Stepniak who encouraged Constance to translate Turgenev's work shortly after she had learned Russian during her pregnancy.

Edward and Constance's only child, David (known to all as Bunny) became a writer too. Born in 1892, he was little more than a toddler when his parents moved home as a temporary measure from Richmond - where they had shared a house with a family from Sweden - to Spark Haw on Froghole Lane, which David later described as 'an old cottage overrun by rats.'

Having inherited about £1000 from her father, Constance bought a piece of land on the greensand hills between Limpsfield Chart and Kent Hatch ('a lovely pasture encircled by beech woods…approachable only by a rough cart-track') on which she and Edward planned to build the house that would become a magnet for writers, exiles and free-thinkers – 'remote from a village and … not part of any existing community' - for the Garnetts saw themselves as outsiders with no wish to be part of the Victorian social norm.

As soon as the house was finished in February 1896, along with four-year old David, they deserted Froghole and moved to The Cearne, whose 'gigantic stone fireplaces [were] partially screened by low oak beams and inglenooks' - the stone having been hewn from a quarry on the Chart.

It is said that The Cearne became a 'literary hothouse' which led to the blossoming of creative talent among those who were drawn there by Edward's invitation. Hilaire Belloc was one – a short, thick-set man who never stopped talking. W.H. Hudson was another who visited often; in springtime he would

identify birds by their song; he discovered natterjack toads in the pond at Trevereaux, and in summer was able to entice nightjars to sing by imitating their call. Joseph Conrad was a favourite, as was Edward Thomas who by then was living at Sevenoaks Weald near W.H. Davies, the ‘Supertramp’ poet who would also stomp his way to The Cearne on his peg leg. A frequent visitor was John Galsworthy, ‘a bald serious man’ with literary ambitions, whose work flowered under Edward’s mentoring.

But it was not only writers who came to the Garnetts’ door. There was a family of Russian Jewish political exiles who rented a cottage at Kent Hatch, and following the Turkish massacre of Armenians in 1895, a refugee family from Armenia with their entourage who stayed for a while at The Cearne until they found temporary accommodation down the hill at the Old Dairy Farm.

Unsurprisingly, Edward wrote too, yet his fiction was considerably less distinguished than that of those he championed, and with it he lacked the success won by his wife Constance’s translations, while his play, *The Breaking Point*, which concerned an unmarried mother, was considered unsuitable to be granted a dramatic licence by the Lord Chamberlain’s office, and was later cited by George Bernard Shaw in his campaign to free the stage from censorship.

Having been a vociferous opponent of the Boer War, once the First World War set Europe aflame, he joined the Friends Ambulance Corps in Italy rather than take arms. The war to end all wars revealed cracks in the social order, and when hostilities were over, it was clear that public attitudes had changed, the moral climate became less hypocritical, as a result some of the authors he’d championed before 1914 suddenly became best-sellers as their work reflected new freedoms. And with these changes Edward mellowed, growing old, clumsy and ponderous, yet he still saw great divisions between those he deemed to be ‘on the inside’ and those among whom he chose to stand, who were ‘on the outside’.

In 1935, having spent more than forty years nourishing some of the finest literary talent of the age, Stanley Baldwin offered Edward Garnett the Companion of Honour in recognition of his influence on the world of letters. Perhaps it is no great surprise that he refused to accept it, just as he turned down the award of Honorary Doctor of Literature from the University of Manchester, for he was not only retiring and modest, but determined to be an outsider to the last.

Rising from his bed on the morning of 21 February 1937, he complained of a terrible headache and promptly collapsed, dying of a cerebral haemorrhage. A lifelong atheist, Edward Garnett was cremated without a regular funeral at

Golders Green, with a large number of his friends gathered round. His ashes were later buried by his son in the garden at The Cearne.

As for Constance, after Edward's death she lived alone and became something of a recluse, quietly tending the plants in her garden. By now she was white-haired, half-blind and frail, and having developed a heart condition, was dependent on a walking stick to get around. In her time she translated more than seventy volumes of Russian literature from the likes of Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Turgenev, and was every bit as successful in her career as her husband had been in his – the husband whom she outlived by almost a decade.

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