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Light and Outrageous

By [Edward Mendelson](#)

W. H. Auden's Book of Light Verse
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1.

When a poet presents an outline of the history of literature, he generally describes a tradition of many centuries that culminates in his own poems. W.B. Yeats found the high points of English verse and prose in the Irish Protestant writers he claimed as his literary ancestors, Bishop Berkeley and Jonathan Swift, and in visionaries such as William Blake. T.S. Eliot persuaded many of his contemporaries that the central line of descent in the history of English poetry extended from the school of John Donne to Eliot himself; Milton and the Romantics were mere offshoots, and Shakespeare's primacy was slightly doubtful. W.H. Auden compiled *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*¹ in 1937 partly to provide an entertaining textbook of literary history that emphasized a tradition that could be traced back from his own poems through the work of Byron, Pope, and Chaucer, with contributions from dozens of poets known only as "Anon.," derived not only from books but also from oral tradition, broadsides, and tombstones, a tradition that comprised ballads, limericks, nonsense verse, sea chanties, barroom songs, nursery rhymes, epigrams, spirituals, and the songs sung by soldiers, laborers, criminals, and tramps.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Oxford books of verse enjoyed greater prestige and authority than any other series of anthologies, although they had the slightly stuffy air of monuments left over from an earlier generation. The series began with Arthur Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of English Verse*, first published in 1900, which the compiler unhesitatingly described as a collection of the "best" English verse from the thirteenth through the nineteenth century. Quiller-Couch was both a prolific popular writer and a successful academic whose work was later rewarded with a knighthood. He also produced an *Oxford Book of Ballads* and an *Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*. By the mid-1930s other equally distinguished senior academics had prepared Oxford books of English mystical verse, and of sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century verse. In 1936 an *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* appeared, edited by the elder statesman of poetry in English, W.B. Yeats, whose capricious selections favored the poetry of his late-Victorian youth, and who rewrote some of the contents on the grounds that he was a better poet than the original authors. The book's publication under the Oxford imprimatur caused a minor literary scandal that would not have occurred had Yeats compiled it for a less dignified and less authoritative press.

When Auden proposed an Oxford book of light verse the following year, he was, at the age of thirty, the most admired poet of his generation, and he had written precociously learned essays on poetry, psychology, and politics, but Oxford dons remembered that they had given him only a third-class degree in 1928, and conservative reviewers mistrusted him as a left-wing firebrand without respect for established authority. His most recent publication was *Spain*, a pamphlet poem in stark red wrappers about the Spanish civil war; and his light-hearted, gossipy *Letters from Iceland*, written in collaboration with his friend Louis MacNeice, was about to appear. Any anthology he might prepare for Oxford would clearly be quite different from anything already in the series.

Letters from Iceland included Auden's "Letter to Lord Byron," a respectful imitation of *Don Juan* in stanzas one line shorter than Byron's, but with much of Byron's energy and wit. The poem referred to itself as "light verse" and Auden declared his intentions for it near the beginning:

*I want a form that's large enough
to swim in,
And talk on any subject that I
choose,
From natural scenery to men and
women,
Myself, the arts, the European
news: And since she's on a holiday, my
Muse
Is out to please, find everything
delightful
And only now and then be mildly
spiteful.*

On the question of his stature as a poet, he touched his cap politely to his noble correspondent:

*Parnassus after all is not a
mountain
Reserved for A.1 climbers such
as you;
It's got a park, it's got a public
fountain.
The most I ask is leave to share a
pew
With Bradford or with Cottam,
that will do:
To pasture my few silly sheep
with Dyer
And picnic on the lower slopes
with Prior.*

He was claiming the lowest possible rank for himself among poets. Sir Edward Dyer, a minor lyricist and minor courtier to Henry VIII, was best known as the author of "My mind to me a kingdom is," which he probably did not write. Matthew Prior was a late-seventeenth-century minor poet who wrote in sentimental and burlesque styles. Most of Auden's readers would have recognized these two names and remembered some of the poems. Fewer would have recognized the names of two septuagenarian Anglican clergymen, the Reverend E.E. Bradford and the Reverend S.E. Cottam, authors of absurdly sentimental poems about the beauty of young boys, when they were not writing philosophical essays and volumes of sermons. (John Betjeman, who is thanked in the acknowledgments of *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* and whose poems are the last two in the book, shared Auden's amused interest in Bradford and Cottam, and had joined Auden in attending one of Bradford's sermons.)

Auden's low valuation of his work was partly an ironic pose, partly a reaction against his own ambitions. As an undergraduate he had told his tutor that he intended to be a great poet, and although he learned to be more circumspect than this, he never abandoned his goal. In his early twenties, when he was already famous as a poet, he had begun and abandoned a compressed modern version of Dante's *Commedia*. He also apparently indulged in fantasies of himself as a kind of messianic leader, although the only clear trace of these fantasies in his published work was his furious rejection of them in the play he wrote in collaboration with Christopher Isherwood in 1936, *The Ascent of F6*. The charismatic climber-hero of the play destroys himself and his followers on a climb undertaken for the sake of fame and adulation, not for the sake of his love of climbing. Auden repeatedly declared his distaste for Shelley, but his vehemence against him had much to do with his own temptations to write the unacknowledged legislation of the world. Those temptations briefly erupted again after Yeats's death in January 1939, when Auden urged himself in his elegy for Yeats to "Let the healing fountain start" and "Teach the free man how to praise,"

and then a few months later when he wrote in "September 1, 1939" about the power of his own voice "To undo the folded lie" and "Show an affirming flame."

The Oxford Book of Light Verse collected the work of poets who were fellow citizens with their neighbors, not liberators, legislators, or leaders. Auden listed in his introduction the three kinds of poetry that he had included: folk songs and other poetry written to be spoken or sung before an audience; "poetry intended to be read, but having for its subject-matter the everyday social life of its period or the experiences of the poet as an ordinary human being"; and nursery rhymes and other nonsense poetry with general appeal. Light verse, Auden wrote, "can be serious," and at the same time that he was compiling the anthology he was writing serious light poems of his own. "As I walked out one eve-ning./Walking down Bristol street," is the opening of one of his most profound meditations on morality and time.

Auden's introduction proposes a social theory of literature in which different kinds of society produce different kinds of poetry. Light poetry is the product of an integrated society, and until the end of the sixteenth century, all English poetry was light poetry in the sense that its subject matter came from the shared interests of poets and their audience. "As long as society was united in its religious faith and its view of the universe, as long as the way in which people lived changed slowly, audience and artists alike tended to have much the same interests and to see much the same things." Difficult poetry, like that of Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton, is one of the consequences of social and ideological upheavals like those of the Protestant Reformation. After those upheavals, light verse inevitably retreated into the status of minor poetry, except at times like the Restoration and the early eighteenth century, when society became more integrated and poets like Dryden and Pope could write great poetry in a conversational voice, writing about the ordinary events of everyday life.

After the further upheavals of the Romantic era, Auden argues in his introduction, the only true community was that of the family, the only real social bond that of parent and child; and so the greatest light verse of the nineteenth century was the children's poetry of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. The conditions of frontier life in America, however, fostered a folk poetry that retained the strengths of preindustrial folk poetry in Europe, and Auden's anthology includes large samplings of ballads from the west-ern frontier and spirituals and folk songs from the urban frontiers settled by freed slaves and their descendants. But the period that produced this poetry, he observes, is ending in America, as it long ago ended in Europe. Now, he writes, an integrated society can no longer emerge by itself, but it must be built by deliberate political acts. Societies

will either be made consciously or decay. A democracy in which each citizen is as fully conscious and capable of making a rational choice, as in the past has been possible only for the wealthier few, is the only kind of society which in the future is likely to survive for long.... For poetry which is at the same time light and adult can only be written in a society which is both integrated and free.

Auden did not entirely believe his own argument, and his later writings tend to present poetry in terms of a private conversation between an individual poet and an individual reader, even when the two are divided by many centuries, rather than in terms of the common life of a society and the shared concerns of poets (perceived as plural) and their audience (also perceived as plural). Already in his introduction he understands the greatest poetry to arise from the tension between lightness and its opposite:

Lightness is a great virtue, but light verse tends to be conventional, to accept the attitudes of the society in which it is written. The more homogeneous a society, the closer the artist is to the everyday life of his time, the easier it is for him to communicate what he perceives, but the harder for him to see honestly and truthfully, unbiased by the conventional responses of his time. The more unstable a society, and the more detached from it the artist, the clearer he can see, but the harder it is for him to convey it to others. In the greatest periods of English Literature, as in the Elizabethan period, the tension was at its strongest. The artist was still

sufficiently rooted in the life of his age to feel in common with his audience, and at the same time society was in a sufficient state of flux for the age-long beliefs and attitudes to be no longer compulsive on the artist's vision.

2.

Auden made his living as a schoolmaster from 1930 to 1935, first at the Larchfield Academy in Scotland, a rather dour place that he left without regret after two years, then at the Downs School, Colwall, where he enjoyed himself enormously as a teacher and colleague. (He returned there for a single term in 1937 to fill in while another teacher was away.) In 1934 he compiled the first of his many anthologies, *The Poet's Tongue*, a two-volume collection for use in schools, which he edited in collaboration with a schoolmaster friend, John Garrett. The contents ranged from serious poetry to nonsense verse, often on the same page, because the poems were arranged in each volume by alphabetical order of their first lines. The names of the poets were hidden away in an index so that the poems could be read (as the introduction explained) "free from the bias of great names and literary influences."

The story of *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* begins on July 28, 1937, a day or two after Auden finished his last term of teaching at the Downs School, when he was in Oxford as one of the judges at a festival of spoken poetry. There he met Charles Williams, the poet, novelist, and religious writer who worked at Oxford University Press, and their conversation turned eventually to Yeats's recent *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, which Auden deplored, saying it lacked the authority of the others in the series. Williams described the rest of the conversation in an internal memo:

In some surprise I asked him whether he and his friends had any respect for any of them, but he did seem to feel, anyhow, for the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Century books, that they were an adequate and important collection. He then went on to say that he very much wanted to do an *Oxford Book of Light Verse*. I murmured something to the effect that books of light verse were always very depressing when they were actually before one.^[2]

Auden explained that he hoped to include such poems as Chaucer's "Wife of Bath," some Robert Burns, and bits of *Don Juan*. "His main point," Williams continued, "was that light verse of this kind...showed the difference between the sensibilities of the various periods even better than more solemn stuff. I agree with this, because great tragedy always has a kind of similarity about it, whereas lighter stuff enjoys its own distinctions. His view therefore is that such a book may be a contribution to criticism as well as a collection of poems."

Two months later the press accepted Auden's idea and agreed to pay him an advance of £100. Auden compiled his selections during October and November 1937, working long hours in libraries while staying with his parents in Birmingham and transcribing folk songs and popular songs remembered by friends and in at least one case ("Foggy Foggy Dew") by a helpful sailor. (Other verse transcribed from oral reports included "Frankie and Johnny," "Cocaine Lil and Morphine Sue," "The Dying Airman," and many limericks.) When Oxford eventually sent him a contract, he objected that the press wanted the book to be too short. As to the length, he wrote, "I will do my best to keep that down, but if the book is to be worth anything, it must be a parallel book to the Quiller-Couch," in effect, an alternative history of poetry with a different emphasis from the earlier book's focus on the lyric tradition.

Among Oxford academics, the friends whom Auden most admired were Professor E.R. Dodds, the classicist, and his wife, A.E. (Annie Edwards) Dodds, who had been a lecturer in English when she and her husband lived in Birmingham, where Auden had met them through his family. A.E. Dodds, who knew she had better practical skills than Auden at scholarship and editing, offered to prepare Auden's characteristically inexact typescript for the press. While Auden traveled elsewhere in England, he sent her additional poems, together with these instructions:

And if

- (a) Anything else good occurs to you put it in.
- (b) Anything doesn't seem good enough, cut it out.^[3]

In January 1938 Auden, together with Christopher Isherwood, left England to report on the Sino-Japanese War. From Hankow he wrote to A.E. Dodds, "I keep waking up in the night and thinking of all the mistakes in the light verse text. The moment we get back I want to come and stay with you for a few weeks and learn method." A.E. Dodds, as she sent different sections of the book to the press, agreed with his judgment. "All Mr. Auden's typescript needs checking," she told the press. "He gave me the references from memory and a good many are wrong." When Auden returned in August, the book was still unfinished, and while he continued to make changes he told A.E. Dodds, "Don't send me proofs unless there is any difficulty. I couldn't bear it."

Obscenities in the text and doubtful attributions of authorship were the most contentious causes of difficulty between him and the press. Auden successfully reassured the publisher that a coarse word in William Dunbar's "In secret Place this hyndir Nycht" need not be censored: "Fukkit passes because it's medieval and scholars [that is, the only readers who would understand the word] are past hope." He agreed to drop a well-known soldiers' song, "Après la guerre," whose meanings were all too obvious. But he protested against other acts of editorial air-brushing, writing to A.E. Dodds, "For God's sake please stop the Press making the broadsheets etc suitable for the BBC."

He was slightly alarmed at the press's decision to identify all printed sources. Questioned by A.E. Dodds about one of his selections, he replied, "I don't know who Austin was, and it didn't say in that grubby little booklet the name of which I have forgotten which I found in the Margaret Street Library [in Birmingham]. Anyway I'm sure it wasn't Alfred. Let's call him Samuel." The press and A.E. Dodds decided to drop the poem instead.

The book appeared in October 1938, welcomed by some reviewers who understood Auden's motives for including moments of darkness and profundity in a book of light verse. Others objected that the title misled them into expecting trivially undemanding verse that the book did not supply. Sales were unexpectedly strong, and a reprint was called for two months after publication, but Oxford demanded one change in the contents. Obscure words in the oldest poems in the book had been translated by a young academic, J.A.W. Bennett, later an eminent medievalist, who had left "fukkit" tactfully unexplained in the poem by Dunbar that had raised questions earlier, but had annotated two other words that both meant "penis." As Auden explained to a friend later, "I've had to cut a beautiful love poem of Dunbar's out of the second English edition because the travellers [salesmen] said it dished the book with the girls' schools. It's all the fault of the learned Oxford ninny who did the glossary, and was so conscientious he translated all the dirty words."^[4] Auden was in Brussels when the book needed to be revised, and had no access to Dunbar's poems, so he asked the press to substitute something else by Dunbar, or to ask A.E. Dodds to choose something. All printings of the book after the first included Dunbar's "The Ballad of Kynd Kittok" in place of Auden's original choice, but many years later, in 1970, Auden included the poem in his "commonplace book" *A Certain World*. The new edition reproduces Auden's original selection.

Oxford reprinted the anthology in hard covers until the mid-1960s, then issued it in paperback in 1973, a few weeks before Auden's death, under the title *W.H. Auden's Oxford Book of Light Verse*, as if to signal that it was more of a personal selection than one that came with the authority of its publisher. Oxford also commissioned Kingsley Amis to compile a *New Oxford Book of Light Verse*, which appeared in 1978. This collection of undemandingly amusing verse (about half the length of Auden's) was effectively the book that Auden's disappointed reviewers had hoped to see in 1938. In his introduction Amis approvingly echoed Charles Dibdin, who had written in a preface in 1825: "To raise a good-natured smile was the major part of this work written." Amis succeeded in this purpose, partly by devoting one of the largest sections of the anthology to Auden, who received as many pages as Lewis Carroll did, and whose share of the book was smaller only than Lord Byron's. Amis's anthology is consistently amusing, but Auden's, perhaps more than any other anthology of English poetry, manages to be amusing, moving, instructive, outrageous, and

profound.

Notes

[1] A new edition will be published by New York Review Books this month under the title *W.H. Auden's Book of Light Verse*, with a version of this essay as an introduction.

[2] Williams's internal memo, and the letters from Auden and A.E. Dodds to Oxford University Press quoted below, are in the archives of Oxford University Press. Auden's meeting with Williams had further consequences. He recalled in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims* (edited by James A. Pike; Morehouse-Gorham, 1956, p. 41), a collection of essays by converts to the Episcopal Church, that he had begun thinking seriously about religion when he was in Spain during the Spanish civil war. Then,

shortly afterwards, in a publisher's office, I met an Anglican layman, and for the first time in my life felt myself in the presence of personal sanctity. I had met many good people before who made me feel ashamed of my own shortcomings, but in the presence of this man—we never discussed anything but literary business—I did not feel ashamed. I felt transformed into a person who was incapable of doing or thinking anything base or unloving. (I later discovered that he had had a similar effect on many other people.)

[3] Auden's letters to A.E. Dodds are in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

[4] Auden to Edward Kallman, June 1, 1939 (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin).

Letters

October 7, 2004: Edward Mendelson, [Auden's Wit](#)