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The Literary Encyclopedia

Theodore Watts-Dunton (1832-1914)

Jodie Matthews (University of Huddersfield)

(Walter Theodore Watts-Dunton)

Poet.

Active 1874-1914 in England

Theodore Watts-Dunton was known primarily as a literary critic for the *Athenaeum* and *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, for his romantic writing about the Romani people of England and Wales in poetry and prose fiction, and for his literary and artistic friendships, in particular his long-time support and companionship to the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne. While successful in his own lifetime, his work has fallen out of favour and is no longer generally well-known.

Walter Theodore Watts was born in 1832 in St. Ives, Huntingdonshire to John King Watts, a solicitor, and his East Anglian mother, Susannah Dunton. Theodore incorporated her surname into his own by deed poll in 1897. He was apparently enchanted by literature from a young age, with a formative experience being that of reading Spenser's *Faerie Queen*. Much is made by his biographer, Thomas St. E. Hake (son of the poet Thomas Gordon Hake), of the early influence of family members on the subjects that would later come to interest him, such as his maternal grandmother's interest in Gypsies and Gypsy life. After attending school in Cambridge, he trained as a solicitor and practised in London.

Watts-Dunton was over forty when he changed career and began to write seriously. He joined the *Examiner* in 1874 and then began to write anonymously for the *Athenaeum* the following year as a reviewer. His poems and other writings about Gypsies also appeared in this publication during his long career there. For example, an article from 1877 describes the ascent of Snowdon with Sinfi Lovell – a passage that was to be pasted in to his later novel, *Aylwin*. He contributed to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and *Chambers's Cyclopaedia* on literature and Gypsies, and to periodicals such as *Literature* (published by *The Times*).

The famed author of *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye*, George Borrow, was an early hero of Watts-Dunton's and, after an inauspicious first meeting in the sea at Yarmouth when Watts-Dunton was a young man, they were reintroduced by the poet Hake and became great friends, with Watts-Dunton seeing the reclusive author in Roehampton and Putney. Borrow's work and interests are a clear influence on Watts-Dunton's writing, and Watts-Dunton wrote the Introduction to a 1900 edition of *The Romany Rye*. As a prominent Gypsy lover, Watts-Dunton painted an often mystical picture of the suspicious and wary race of wanderers – suspicious and

wary from an instinct transmitted through ages of dire persecutions from the Children of the Roof (Watts-Dunton 1916: 26-27). His romanticized construction of Gypsies and insistence that they could not be seen as British are noteworthy to those considering the politics of nineteenth-century Gypsy identities. Deborah Epstein Nord has commented that Watts-Dunton considered Borrow's later work, *Wild Wales*, to be lacking in glamour because of the inhibiting presence of his wife and step-daughter on his journey through the principality. This is, Nord proposes, a turn-of-the-century reinvention of Borrow as a sexual bohemian and an indication of the ways in which Borrow's followers appropriated his image for their own literary ends.

Watts-Dunton was also an intimate friend of William Morris who, shortly before his death in 1896, had wanted to produce a limited edition of Watts-Dunton's poetry collection, *The Coming of Love*. The central poems in this collection tell Rhona Boswell's story, that of a Gypsy and her upper-class lover. When Rhona is murdered, Percy Aylwin retreats to the Alps, where he experiences mystical visions. *The Graphic* (11 February 1899) praised the work, saying that Watts-Dunton had a "very picturesque way of putting things," but it is a measure of his celebrity that the quality of his rhymes was rather mocked in *Punch*.

Aylwin, published after a great deal of revision and correction in 1898 when Watts-Dunton was in his sixties, was a sequel to the earlier poetic pieces, dealing with many of the same characters and themes. One of these themes is the "Renascence of Wonder," a romantic revival in literature and general reawakening in mankind; a spiritual theory of the universe in response to what he saw as the materialism of the nineteenth century. Catherine Maxwell has interpreted the novel as being influenced both by the sensation fiction of Wilkie Collins and the Romantic poets, particularly Coleridge (Maxwell 2007). By December of 1898 the novel ran to a tenth edition and by the time of his death in 1914 had sold over 100,000 copies. Despite its popularity in the author's lifetime, it has, until recently, received almost no academic attention.

Watts-Dunton was a friend of the Pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who made drawings inspired by his poetry. He introduced Rossetti to Esmeralda Lock, the Romani wife of his fellow Gypsy lorist Francis Hindes Groome. Rossetti painted Lock several times, most famously as Victor Hugo's Esmeralda. A version of Rossetti appears as a character in *Aylwin*. It was another painter, however, Ford Madox Brown, who introduced Watts-Dunton to one of the most important people in his life: the poet Charles Algernon Swinburne.

Around 1875, acquaintances had become increasingly worried about Swinburne's health and prospects and were relieved when Watts-Dunton took him in hand. The relationship was initially based on Watts-Dunton offering legal and professional advice, eventually coming to manage his affairs and taking him in to live with him at "The Pines," Putney Hill. The benefits of this relationship have been disputed: Watts-Dunton no doubt extended Swinburne's life, but he may also have suppressed some of the poet's creativity. Swinburne remained with Watts-Dunton until his death in 1909, leaving the latter his entire estate. Contemporary newspaper accounts refer to Watts-Dunton as Swinburne's companion and literary executor.

Watts-Dunton married Clara Reich, forty years his junior, in 1905 when he was 73 years old. They had no children. One of the last publications in his lifetime was a foreword to an edition of Keats's letters in 1914, and he continued to write on the subject with a letter to *The Times* about the value of *Endymion* published in April of that year. Having been ill for some time, he died in June 1914, at home at *The Pines*.

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