

- REVIEW -

## A. E. Housman: Hero of the Hidden Life

Edgar Vincent  
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496 pp.

This new volume of almost 500 pages clearly confirms that interest in A. E. Housman and his poetry has not diminished in the eighty-two years since the poet's death. One can safely say that this new biography by Edgar Vincent is now the authoritative one and not likely to be bettered.

For many people the name A. E. Housman is immediately synonymous with *A Shropshire Lad* – the slender volume of sixty-three poems published in 1896 and since then never out of print. However, it is not only of the poet Housman that Vincent writes but also the modest, spotlight-shunning man often beset by Weltschmerz. We are also made aware of his other fulsome achievement: described as one of the most skilled and world-celebrated classicists of his day, a cutting critic, a gourmet of food and wine as well as having a passion for travel and sightseeing by motor and in the early days of flight – the aeroplane.

The present author writes with real sympathy and understanding for and of the inner, private life of his subject and the book is deeply mined for much new and fascinating information. Reminding us that Housman was not an 'Elgarian' figure, we are given examples of his philosophy, his definition of poetry peppered along with plenty of his humour. Given that over the years there have been many musical settings of his poems we discover that he was not a lover of serious music, enjoying more the popular entertainment of the Music Hall. He was furious when he discovered that the composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams, had chopped out two stanzas in his setting of *Is my team ploughing?* His retort was - 'I wonder how he would like me to cut two bars out of his music?' Housman could also be very blunt in his reaction to certain fellow Classical scholars sending, as described by W. H. Auden, 'thunderbolts of poisoned invective'.

As regards other matters Vincent does not shirk to deal with frequent accusations of misogyny and successfully faces the tricky subject of homosexuality head on. Here we find sane and sympathetic discussion on the importance and detail of Housman's gayness, how the poet coped, at the same time also drawing attention to the sub-text underlying many of the poems. One of the most memorable parts of the narration is Housman's early, unrequited love for fellow-student Moses Jackson which becomes an ongoing motif throughout Housman's life and the narrative. This was not just a passing phase but the love of a lifetime and here Vincent writes both sensitively and movingly showing his respect and affection for the subject of this fine study. It is not a biography that should be missed by any reader interested in Housman or that era of British literature and British society – or for an example how a biography should be written.

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