Ireland 1902–6

Young, young she was,
And young was I,
We cried: Love! Come!
Love heard our cry. . . .

I sit and faint
Through year on year.
Was it yesterday
I thought her dear?
(‘Natural History’)

When Harold ‘fled the dingy haunts of frowning law/And disembarked on Erin’s rugged shore’\(^1\) in the autumn of 1902, he told Maurice he intended to stay for about five years, time enough to become a poet. He would have over a year of the rural solitude prescribed by Romantic tradition, and after that there would be Dorothy to share life with him. His job required only a few hours’ daily attendance in an office and probably some travelling round the farms and villages of the Maude estate. If he felt any qualms at collecting rents from the Irish tenants of an English landowner, he did not record them. The cottage, Crevenish, was in ideal hunting country, so he found a beautiful little mare and rode out twice a week. There was plenty of time to write. ‘London was all sour,’ he told Maurice; ‘this has lots of sweet.’

Crevenish had one other occupant, a burly, fair young man named Henry Bentinck, who was filling in a year between leaving Cambridge and joining the army. Tough and clean-living, he gave himself no airs, but he was a cousin of the Duke of Portland – and of Lady Ottoline Morrell, who was later to be a frequent visitor at the Poetry Bookshop. Unfortunately he had none of Lady Ottoline’s enthusiasm for the arts; he had never been to a theatre, and his idea of a good read was a sixpenny novel. He thought the lake was nothing more
than ‘excellent fishing water’ and the autumn woods ‘fine covert for pheasants’. He provided intellectual stimulus of a kind, nevertheless, because his life centred on a simple evangelical faith; he rose early to study his bible, and spoke of Christ as his daily friend. Harold was not convinced, but the long enquiry into religious belief which he was to pursue during the next few years perhaps grew from earnest conversations in the lamp-lit cottage.

Harold returned to England for Christmas 1902, probably staying with the Brownes at Eastbourne. Dorothy was as keen as he was to use their one remaining year of freedom, but in her own way. She was a superb hockey-player. ‘For one season only,’ said The Hockey Field ten months later,

has this brilliant performer flashed comet-like across the hockey world.

... Early last season Sussex hazarded the opinion that they had scored a useful recruit in the hitherto unknown Miss Browne. Not long afterwards the South made the same discovery, and before many weeks were over Miss Browne was playing inside right for England.²

Although she intended to sacrifice her hockey to Harold and his poetry as soon as she was married, her talent – and his lack of interest in it – showed how little they had in common. They began to have doubts, but Marsie would not hear of retreat: a baronet’s brother-in-law with a private income was a prize her daughter could not afford to lose. Maurice noticed nothing except his own misery. Harold was trapped without a confidant in a tangle of hope, duty, self-deception, other people’s ambitions and a good-natured reluctance to hurt.

Back at Crevenish at the start of 1903 he found solitude less agreeable than he had imagined. He could only write in ‘agitated poetical fits’, he told Maurice, and the results were dismal. He composed an ode to Shelley and started a tragedy (‘dreadfully bad’) on the theme of Tristan and Isolde. Another subject was suggested by a footnote in his copy of Byron, referring to Pausanias, a Byzantine tyrant who stabbed the girl he loved while in the grip of nightmare. Not asking himself why this theme seemed attractive, and knowing nothing about Byzantium, he asked Maurice to send history books from Cambridge, soon hammering out over a hundred lines of pastiche Keats. In March he asked whether anyone had written a play on Alexander.

And so it went on: the search for a subject, a bout of intensive writing with minimal planning and revision, and then wretchedness and lassitude. Cut off from all literary contacts except Maurice, and knowing nothing of new directions in the arts, he had little chance of producing anything original. It was partly because he never forgot his isolation at Crevenish that he later set up the Bookshop, where the next generation of poets could come for discussion and the latest publications. Perhaps he remembered his own early efforts when he read Wilfred Owen’s manuscripts at the shop in 1916 and told him to be less Keatsian.