

A.E. Housman and A Shropshire Lad

In the early years of the First World War many young men – including Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon – marched off to the Western Front with a copy of A.E. Housman's little book of poems **A Shropshire Lad** in their pocket.

Though written 20 years earlier, the poems' themes – of love and loss, youth and death, the passing of time, and the distance from home and places of past happiness – struck a chord with the soldiers huddled in the trenches.

They identified with the Shropshire Lads of the poems – luckless lads who can never return to the "land of lost content", who are thwarted in love, and who will die young.

Like Tommo in **Private Peaceful**, many were so young they had experienced little but unrequited love, they were yearning for home and family, they were losing friends, and they were acutely aware of the shortness of life.

Housman was touched when he received a letter from someone who had tended a wounded British soldier in France. The young soldier produced a blood-stained copy of A Shropshire Lad which he'd carried with him throughout his time in the trenches.

In his recent book **Housman Country**, Peter Parker writes: "It is to the young that the poems' prevailing mood of romantic melancholy, their depiction of thwarted or unrequited love, and their railing against the injustice of life have always had a special appeal."

W.H. Auden said: "I don't know how it is with the young today but to my generation no other English poet seemed so perfectly to express the sensibility of a male adolescent."

And in the period after the First World War, George Orwell said Housman "stood for a kind of bitter, defiant paganism, a conviction that life is short and the gods are against you, which exactly fitted the prevailing mood of the young".

Housman wrote most of the 63 poems that make up **A Shropshire Lad** in the early months of 1895 during what he called "a period of continuous excitement". He was a

renowned classical scholar who dedicated much of his life to textual analysis of often obscure Greek and Latin authors.

There has been much speculation about what inspired this outwardly reserved and aloof academic to create such deeply felt poetry that wears its heart on its sleeves.

The influence of one man – Moses Jackson – pervades the poems. Housman fell hopelessly in love with Jackson when the two were roommates at Oxford. The love was unrequited.

Jackson was very different to Housman. He was a science student; handsome and charming, and a keen sportsman who rowed, ran and played rugby. Housman would go on long walks in the country with Jackson. A mutual friend said he seemed to be attracted to Jackson's "simplicity and singleheartedness" – very much the qualities of the Shropshire Lad.

After university they both moved to London and lived together with Jackson's younger brother Adalbert. But a few years later Moses decided to move to India – and in late 1889 Housman wrote a single line in his diary that hid the impact of what must have been devastating news for him: "I heard he was married."

Other events that affected Housman in the years before the publication of *A Shropshire Lad* included the death of his father, the sudden death of Adalbert Jackson, and a newspaper report of an inquest into the suicide of a 19-year-old military cadet at Woolwich. The young man had apparently shot himself rather than live as a gay man at a time when Oscar Wilde and others were being persecuted. He left a note saying: "There is only one thing in this world that would make me thoroughly happy; that one thing I have no earthly hope of obtaining."

Housman saw the report in the *Standard* and kept the cutting to the end of his life in one of his own copies of ***A Shropshire Lad***. The cadet's suicide is the subject of one of the poems.

There was a second burst of poetic creativity in Housman's life – he published another book of poetry, ***Last Poems***, when Moses Jackson died after emigrating to Canada.

As Jackson was dying, Housman told him: “You are largely responsible for my writing poetry.”

Housman said the Shropshire Lad was “an imaginary figure with something of my temper and view of life”.

The lad longs for things that are out of his reach. For a countryside he can't go back to. For friends he'll never see again. For a life lost through war. For a lover that doesn't return his love.

*Look not in my eyes, for fear
They mirror true the sight I see,
And there you find your face too clear
And love it and be lost like me.*

NOTES TO EDITORS:

Contact:

Jo Hird on [07969 050490](tel:07969050490) or jo.hird@mac.com

Website:

www.pickmeuptheatre.com/shropshire-lad

www.pickmeuptheatre.com/fringe

Performances:

Songs From A Shropshire Lad 22-26 Aug 6pm

Private Peaceful 14-19 Aug 9.55am, 21-26 Aug 4.35pm

Venue:

theSpace@NiddryStreet Venue 9 EH1 1TH