The Precarious Survival of Baron Corvo

Stanley Weintraub

English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920, Volume 59, Number 2, 2016, pp. 244-245 (Review)

Published by ELT Press

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THE BIZARRE LIFE AND WRITINGS of Frederick William Rolfe (1860–1913), remembered now as “Baron Corvo,” evoked a new genre of biography when A. J. A. Symons published The Quest for Corvo: An Experiment in Biography in 1934. A curious figure himself, Symons employed the narrative strategy of sleuthing a life and ferreting out its secrets. We have had since such lives as Hugh Trevor-Roper’s Hermit of Peking: The Hidden Life of Sir Edmund Backhouse (1976) and Bernard Wasserman’s The Secret Life of Trebitsch Lincoln (1988), and very likely others. The formula seems to work when the subject is a remarkable, even repellent eccentric of unanticipated achievement—a spy, a crook, a crank, or some other embodiment of erratic genius who lodges in the mind when exposed by a literary Sherlock Holmes.

In 1968, at the Mermaid Theatre in London, I saw Peter Luke’s mesmerizing adaptation of Corvo’s novel of 1904, Hadrian VII. Alec McCowen played, brilliantly, the pathetic, seedy, rejected candidate for the priesthood—Rolfe’s dream vision of himself—who is summoned to become Pope, reforms the papacy, creates a flock of enemies thereby, and is assassinated. The experience of a corrupt, fantasy Vatican as brought to the stage might have made a Corvo cultist of anyone. Yet Rolfe had failed, more than once, the seminarist’s vocation, and was almost always fraudulent, adrift and in debt.

Audaciously turning his name at first to Fr. Rolfe, he suggested by it a Catholic vocation he would further fantasize after a pathetic, penurious residence in Italy to “Baron Corvo.” His whimsical Stories Toto Told Me, initiated in The Yellow Book in the mid-1890s, had seemed to promise success, but Rolfe was his own worst enemy, inventing his past, exploiting his friends, concocting his fiction out of pederasty and paranoia. His murky, quirky The Weird of the Wanderer (1912) failed; his cantankerous, posthumously published The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole (1934), set in the lowlife dregs of Venice, was only read in his lifetime, before its publication, by the early enthusiasts of what became a Corvo cult.

A self-pitying scoundrel whose splenetic semi-autobiographical fiction is largely less than distinguished, Corvo survived among loyal cultists championing his defiant obsessiveness, turbulent life, and eccentric prose style. Preeminent in the dwindling coterie of Corvine scholars and collectors of relics is Robert Scoble, an Australian whose
doctoral research was on the genesis and survival of the cult, and author earlier of *Raven: The Turbulent World of Baron Corvo* (2013). His lavishly illustrated successor work, primarily a series of short biographies of devotees, opens with publisher Grant Richards, with whom Rolfe quarreled, and Hugh Benson, a Catholic convert and priest attracted by Rolfe’s idiosyncratic style but put off by his lifestyle. He would be caricatured, nastily, as the Rev. Bubugo Bonsen in *The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole*.

Most early Corvines are forgotten except in Scoble’s pages. Christopher Millard is a rare exception—in the words of Julian Symons, “a grey-haired, disreputable, handsome bookseller and bibliophile who produced under the pen-name of Stuart Mason a bibliography of Oscar Wilde’s writings.” According to Symons, Millard lent A. J. A. Symons (a elder brother) both *Hadrian VII* and Rolfe’s pornographic letters from Venice written in the last year of “Corvo’s” life—the impetus for the crucial *The Quest for Corvo*. A further assist came from Shane Leslie, who ranks among the leading Corvines along with biographers Donald Weeks (1971) and Miriam Benkovitz (1977), who also produced earlier, as *Prancing Novelist* (1973), a life of another memorable eccentric, Ronald Firbank. Those who remain, largely collectors of manuscripts and memorabilia, are to Scoble “a charmed and narrow circle.” The once-resilient cluster of aficionados, Scoble recognizes, is fading, and little of Corvo is likely to be read beyond the Toto stories and *Hadrian VII*. *The Corvo Cult* may be a literary tombstone to Frederick Rolfe.

*STANLEY WEINTRAUB*
University of Delaware

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**An Archaeologist’s Approach to Baron Corvo**


WHAT DO YOU DO when you have spent a considerable part of a research lifetime digging up fresh details about the life of a writer of peripheral interest to the mainstream of readers and scholars, and when what you have discovered guides you to little new understanding of your subject’s life when it is seen whole? One likelihood is that very soon the only course will be to deposit your work online in a location that offers access to the relatively few readers who will be interested, and also provides at least reasonable hope that the material will be moved from platform to platform as digital technology evolves. Robert