The Poetry of Henry Newbolt
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WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS since his death in 1938, Sir Henry Newbolt has either been left out of discussions about poetry and poets altogether, or favoured only with the most cursory of dismissals: “Newbolt, with an irritating monotony of metre, and a great appearance of nobility, celebrated the worst side of Imperialism.” Typically, but carelessly, he is described as “an even more nautical Kipling,” or alternatively as Kipling’s “well-dressed shadow,” while his poems are derided as “huffing patriotic verses,” liable to be filled with “high-minded obtuseness.”

Certainly he wrote patriotic verse that praised England and English traditions, for he came out of a very particular and narrowly defined context that was neither British nor European, but intensely English:

ENGLAND! where the sacred flame
Burns before the inmost shrine,
Where the lips that love thy name
Consecrate their hopes and thine,
Where the banners of thy dead
Weave their shadows overhead,
Watch beside thine arms to-night,
Pray that God defend the Right.
"The Vigil," of which this is the first stanza, is overtly and passionately patriotic, but Newbolt could also express similar sentiments with a quiet simplicity perhaps not so readily associated with him, as this poem, "A Sower," written at the end of the Boer War in 1902, indicates:

With sanguine looks  
And rolling walk  
Among the rooks  
He loved to stalk,  

While on the land  
With gusty laugh  
From a full hand  
He scattered chaff.  

Now that within  
His spirit sleeps  
A harvest thin  
The sickle reaps;  

But the dumb fields  
Desire his tread,  
And no earth yields  
A wheat more red.

Yet Newbolt's entire poetic output is unselectively grouped together and then dismissed, and it is not merely the poetry that is dismissed; it is the man himself, and all that he is presumed to stand for, to the point where he seems sometimes to be little more than a man of straw acting for a type no longer thought acceptable: Colonel Blimp; public school buffoon; upholder of Imperialism; smug, blind Edwardian. Patrick Howarth even used him to name a certain species, *homo newboltiensis*, suggesting that while Newbolt himself was a reality, he also stood for a particular ideal of his own age:

Imbued with a strong sense of institutional loyalty, upper middle class by background, conformist in belief, dedicated to a concept, not simply of "my country right or wrong," but of a nation enjoying a natural moral prerogative, accepting ungrudgingly the demands of service and duty, inclined to treat women either as companions or as unmentionable; add to this a natural power of command, some degree of worldly success, a distrust of latter-day politicians
and a tendency towards philistinism in artistic taste, and we have the species *homo newboltiensis* or Newbolt Man.6

This "ideal" certainly appeared in a good deal of early twentieth-century literature. One only has to think of John Buchan's heroes, for instance. Briskly defining the notion of "Newbolt Man," Paul Fussell represents him as being "Honorable, stoic, brave, loyal, courteous—and unaesthetic, unironic, unintellectual and devoid of wit."7 But how close are either of these descriptions of Newbolt Man to the man, Newbolt? Instead of continuing to accept Newbolt not as an individual but as a species—a rather uninteresting, unattractive and embarrassing species—might it not now prove more helpful to reappraise the contribution of the man himself?

In his book *The Making of Victorian England*, Kitson Clark begins by looking at the need for historical revision, whose "most important task," he says, is

to rescue real men and women who have been shrunk by historians into the bloodless units of a generalization, or have become the ugly depersonalized caricatures of partisan legend or modern prejudice. It is a task well worth doing, since from the contemplation of the stereotypes which have been drawn by historians and by politicians is engendered much of the hatred of the world.8

Hatred is a strong word to use in this present context, perhaps, yet the caricaturing—the stereotyping—of Henry Newbolt is not an isolated case of contemporary antipathy towards a part of the world and a part of time that many have found distinctly uncongenial. In that "golden" era before World War I, England was full of men of a certain schooling and background whose ideas, beliefs, and actions have not merely seemed perplexing to subsequent generations, but, in a curious way, almost shaming. Hence, there has been a certain amount of reluctance to try and understand in depth those minor, but nevertheless representative, late Victorian and Edwardian figures such as Newbolt. To look at an age solely through its major figures, while obviously fascinating, is to see only a part of the picture, and that not always a truly reflective one. Figures more common to their age, and in some ways more representative of it than its geniuses, are equally fascinating to study and can reveal much about the mores of the society they moved in. Moreover, as Newbolt himself once said, in a protest about the neglect of the *Ingoldsby Legends*:
When a writer has once enjoyed the consideration of reasonably qualified contemporaries, and has expressed or influenced their taste, he can no longer be dismissed as a pretender—he must be scientifically observed, described at least, and assigned his place, however obscure, in the line of development.9

And he is right. Newbolt, while more than the prototype for a species, is representative of a certain type of writer, once widely admired, who seems to our present era to be almost entirely hidden from view, annihilated even, by World War I. It is as if the enormity of that event and of the changes it brought about have created a thick fog bank between those born after it and those living immediately before it. We read what the fathers of those young soldiers had to say, and in the context of our understanding of modern warfare and of the modern world, their words recede sometimes incomprehensibly into the mist. We find it hard, in fact, to read their words in a context that does not include World War I, and all that has come after it. It is a period, as E. J. Hobsbawm has noted, that “seems extraordinarily remote and beyond return when seen across the impassable canyon of August 1914.” Yet it is also true, he adds, that “at the same time, paradoxically, so much of what is still characteristic of the late twentieth century has its origin in the last thirty years before the First World War.”10 We should be wary of dismissing (particularly unread) a substantial body of writing that was not only widely enjoyed by pre-war Britain, but that might help us to understand characteristics of our own era. To assume that Newbolt and his generation have nothing of interest to say to us today is to avoid part of a valuable historical and cultural heritage. We need to be able to look at the context within which they wrote, to look through the fog of the war years, back to the distant sunshine of England before the war and to what formed its beliefs, its prejudices, and its writers.

Maybe, as Kitson Clark suggests, people “find it difficult to believe that human beings in the mass can be powerfully affected by men into whose minds they cannot enter, or by ideas which seem to them to be rubbish, expressed in language which sounds to them very like gibberish.”11 Yet it is also possible that in trying to decipher this “gibberish,” we may find a way to probe more deeply into the minds of a long-dead generation, to find out what it was that so powerfully affected them and, perhaps in doing so, to understand a little more clearly our own history—our own sense of place and time.
Henry John Newbolt was the eldest of three children born to the Reverend Henry Francis Newbolt, vicar of the parish of St. Mary's in Bilston, Staffordshire, and his second wife, Emily, née Stubbs. Born on 6 June 1862, the young Newbolt spent his first four years in this town that he remembered later as being treeless, grassless, blighted by smoke, and full of black canals and immense slag-heaps. In May 1866, however, his father died, to his mother’s intense grief, and the family moved to Walsall (also in Staffordshire, but much less black, according to Newbolt), where his maternal grandparents lived, and where Newbolt, with his brother, Francis (Frank), and his sister, Emily (Milly), were to spend the next ten years.

Newbolt was sent to a prep school in Caistor, Lincolnshire, when he was ten, and then to Clifton College in Clifton, Bristol (to which the whole family also moved), when he was fourteen. After he completed his degree at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, in 1885, he read for the Bar, finally qualifying as a barrister in the summer of 1887. He stayed in the legal field for ten years before the astonishing success of his first collection of poems, *Admirals All*, occurred in 1897. He left it for good in 1898, when his second collection, *The Island Race*, consolidated his literary position. He never really took to the law, finding much of the work unstimulating and repetitive, though he did do such good and meticulous work on a vast Law Digest that codified legal decisions (there were 20,000 of these decisions just on “Will”) that a Chancery Judge, Sir Frederic Maugham, later told him, “You think you are famous for your poems, and so you may be, but what has given you immortality is your work in the Law Digest.”

Be that as it may, it was Newbolt’s poetry that allowed him to leave the law, and that precipitated his immediate fame and a lifetime spent in the world of letters. In 1889, he married Margaret Duckworth, of Orchardleigh in Somerset, who encouraged him in his writing, and in 1892, he published an adventure novel called *Taken from the Enemy*, following this in 1895 by *Mordred*, a five-act tragedy in blank verse that was intended to point up Tennyson’s wrongly sentimental (in Newbolt’s view) treatment of Arthurian legend in *Idylls of the King*. It is not a very memorable piece of work, but “we must all,” as one kindly critic remarked, “disgorge the blank verse tragedy that chokes our preliminary utterance.” That critic did at least read the play, though he confessed
that "I never met anyone else who has." (My own copy, given to me by one of Newbolt's grandsons, was uncut.)

After Mordred, however, the gods smiled, and Newbolt enjoyed considerable success with his poetry as the old century slipped into the new. His position as a man of letters was further strengthened in 1900, when the publisher John Murray offered him the editorship of a new magazine, to be entitled the *Monthly Review*. Newbolt was enthusiastic, and the inaugural issue in October 1900 included the first of a series of essays on early Florentine painting by Roger Fry, an enchanting short piece by Mary Coleridge called "On Loss of Time," a poem by Newbolt ("The Nile"), a long review by Arthur Quiller-Couch, the first chapter of a serialization of Anthony Hope's *Tristram of Blent*, articles on the war in South Africa and on the war training of Naval officers, an extract from the autobiography of the Amir of Afghanistan, and two editorials that were concerned with Liberal politics and beliefs. This last was to be Newbolt's eventual undoing as editor, for although he promised that he had no intention of turning it into a Liberal magazine, he could not, of course, resist doing so, being a staunch Liberal himself and feeling strongly about politics. Unfortunately, Murray's was a Conservative publishing house who became increasingly embarrassed about their renegade publication. There were never any hard feelings, though, and Newbolt parted company with Murray amicably in 1904, having edited the *Review* for almost exactly four years.

Although it never amassed the readership that was hoped for it, the *Monthly Review* was a very respected magazine at the time. It was particularly well printed and edited, and had a continued wide range of subject matter, with an easy balance between urgent matters of the day, lighter pieces, serious reviewing, and the arts in general. Walter Graham, in his *English Literary Periodicals*, considered that it had "the highest literary quality of the time." It firmly established Newbolt as a literary figure, and for the rest of his life he was to earn his living solely from his writing and his literary activities, for unlike so many of his contemporaries, he did not have a private income with which he could keep his family.

In 1907, he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and he was a founding member of its Academic Committee (along with Robert Bridges, Joseph Conrad, Edmund Gosse, Thomas Hardy, Henry
James, Arthur Pinero, and W. B. Yeats). This committee, formed in 1910, was intended to be a breakaway group from the main body of the R.S.L., whose members' scholarly concerns and interests were so diffuse at this time that the Society no longer seemed to be primarily serving the field of literature. In fact, the R.S.L., through the urgings of its members, did move back towards literature, and Newbolt was a key figure in the move. He was also an important member of The English Association, a body formed in 1907 to promote good usage of English, but more importantly to advance the teaching of English in schools and the methods by which it should be taught, and he remained interested and involved in the teaching of English for the rest of his life.

By the start of World War I, Newbolt had produced seven collections of poetry: *Admirals All* (1897), *The Island Race* (1898), *The Sailing of the Longships* (1902), *Clifton Chapel and Other School Poems* (1908), *Goodchild's Garland* (1909), and *Songs of Memory and Hope* (1909). There were also two editions of his collected poems: *Collected Poems, 1897–1907* (1910), and *Poems New and Old* (1912). In addition to his poetry, he had written five novels: *Taken from the Enemy* (1892), *The Old Country* (1906), *The New June* (1909), *The Twymans* (a semi-autobiographical work written in 1910), and *Aladore* (1914). Sundry other works, including two volumes of new compilations of stories from Froissart, and a well-received book revising previous notions about the battle tactics used at Trafalgar, also appeared during this period. Newbolt was busy, contented, and fully immersed in the contemporary world of literature.

He was friends with such diverse literary figures as Thomas Hardy (a friendship that was begun by Newbolt's glowing review of the first volume of *The Dynasts* in the *Monthly Review*, and that continued for twenty five years), Robert Bridges, Laurence Binyon, H. G. Wells, John Buchan, Walter de la Mare, and Maurice Hewlett, who wrote of him in 1911: "I'm extremely drawn to Newbolt. I like his mind and share a great many of his ideals. He has far more culture than me. I think he has a sweet nature." Newbolt much enjoyed the company of such friends. And he himself was obviously a good conversationalist, enjoying stimulating discussion, and stimulating others who were with him, as Walter de la Mare remembered:
He delighted in [talk]—as well as in conversation; and any question on the target would at once decoy the lean clear cut Roman face in your direction, alert as a kestrel—like the figurehead on a vessel voyaging over seas which, however familiar they might be, might also at any moment reveal the unforeseen and the strange. The intent grey-blue eyes pierced into one’s own through a remote haze, as it were, of his mind’s reverie.16

Outside the literary scene, too, Newbolt sought friendship and intellectual stimulation. He was a member of the Athenaeum Club, the Savile Club, and of the famous dining club founded by Dr. Johnson, and simply known as The Club, all of which were home to evenings of intelligent debate and well-told stories. An insight into the varied membership of The Club is given here by Sir William Osler, writing of his first dinner in April 1919 at the special room in Prince’s Hotel, Jermyn Street, where the dinners were held fortnightly:

My first dinner at The Club. The Archbishop of York was to have been in the chair. There were present Sir Henry Newbolt, Kipling, John Buchan, [William] Pember [Reeves], Bailey, Oman, Kenyon & [H.A.L.] Fisher. All but Newbolt & Bailey I had known. N. was in the Chair & I sat between him & Fisher, the Minister of Education. Very good evening.17

A fellow member of The Club, John Buchan, remembered Newbolt’s love of these kinds of evenings, noting that “In conversation he had few superiors”:

He was not a great architect of talk like Arthur Balfour, but a contributor, always in perfect tune with the occasion. . . . He was happiest on literary topics, and of the three men-of-letters I have known who could talk well I should put him first. Edmund Gosse had moments of petulance and uncertain temper; St. Loe Strachey was too copious, too apt to drown a topic with a spate of words; but Henry Newbolt always had a nice sense of the relevant and unfailing intellectual courtesy.18

It was this intelligence, this intellectual courtesy, that drew him into friendships with men such as Hardy, de la Mare and Buchan, and also with such non-literary men as the philosopher J. E. McTaggart and the Liberal politician Edward Grey, who was one of his greatest friends. Newbolt was, in short, a well-liked and well-respected man, a hardworking writer who had established his reputation almost immediately upon
publication of his first collection of poetry, and who continued to be widely read during the Edwardian period.

Physically a slender and active man with a figure always neatly and meticulously brushed and dressed, he was once described by Ezra Pound as "Newbolt who looked twice bathed,"19 and by Virginia Woolf as "a slim greyheaded weasel."20 His son-in-law, Sir Ralph Furse, gives us a somewhat more helpful picture:

Newbolt was of medium height, slight of build but wiry and nimble. His oval classic face with its parchment-coloured skin, smooth silvery hair, hawklike nose, small tight-lipped mouth, and eyes now veiled in reverie, now fixed on yours with keen penetrating gaze, was at moments such a face as Virgil's may have been. He carried his head a little forward from his shoulders, as if he were always looking for something. Neat and quick in all his movements, his whole appearance was birdlike, and his expression at once benign and alertly severe.21

He was a man of great enthusiasm, ardour, and optimism, as well as of intense sociability. He was an excellent shot, whose other passionate interests were fishing, birdwatching, and, from a very young age, heraldry. In that, as in all intellectual journeys he undertook, he was a thorough and painstaking researcher; he was widely read in many areas, but particularly in poetry, both traditional and also, all through his life, contemporary. For although he was involved in many different literary pursuits over the years, poetry remained always his first love and his innermost life.

Newbolt was widely respected in his own day as a man of letters and as an historian, but it is by his poetry that he achieved fame, and by his poetry that he is mostly remembered today (when he is remembered at all). Still read in 1914, Newbolt’s poetry began to decline in popularity towards the middle of the war, suffered an immense drop by 1918, and lost its general appeal almost entirely in the years following. His dramatic rise to fame and his almost equally dramatic fall from grace provide a unique window through which to look at changing literary tastes: a window that is particularly revealing because of the clarity of Newbolt’s expressed attitudes, and one that may help to shed light on the wider happenings of a difficult, often elusive period of history.

For if the ideal that "Newbolt Man" represents is both as chivalrous and as stolid as Paul Fussell suggests, then only half the story of Newbolt himself is being told. Newbolt is certainly representative of the "honor-
able, stoic, brave, loyal, courteous” public school product of the late
nineteenth century, but he is not representative of the “unaesthetic,
unironic, unintellectual and devoid of wit” bore that Fussell contends is
integral to such a product. What he does represent is something much
more interesting, and, in a complete history of the period, both more
important and more complex. He represents the Victorian middle class
and its ideals of family and of education in what was to prove the golden
age of the English public schools; he represents one of the last voices of
belle-lettrism; he represents at the same time one of the last voices of
the middle-brows who so dominated that period of literary life; he
represents a concept of “England” and of patriotism that vanished
forever after World War I; and finally he represents one of the last
movements in poetry to occur in the fin-de-siècle anticipation and
anxiety of the 1890s. Newbolt is a minor figure who represents and
illuminates major Victorian values and traditions.

He was not, it is true, one of those great and innovative poets whose
original vision moves the poetic tradition into previously unexplored
territory; neither was he, in Shelley’s sense, a poet-as-prophet, for
Newbolt was intensely committed to the past and all its implications for
the present. In his poem “Against Oblivion,” he expresses this idea that
history permeates and enriches subsequent ages—an idea that ran
through so much of his work:

Cities drowned in olden time
Keep, they say, a magic chime
Rolling up from far below
When the moon-led waters flow.

So within me, oceans deep
Lies a sunken world asleep.
Lest its bells forget to ring,
Memory! set the tide a-swing!

The importance of his poetry is not that it made something new, but
rather that it responded to values that were esteemed by the age in which
he had grown up and been educated, values that included pride in one’s
country and in her history. That the early poems were enormously
popular (among a very varied range of people) when they first came out
suggests that the values to which Newbolt was responding were widely
shared at the time, and this in itself seems to be a strongly persuasive
reason to re-examine the poetry, for this is an age whose ideals and beliefs have seemed remote, perplexing, even distasteful, to subsequent generations. The work of figures such as Newbolt, a respected, intelligent, ardent and representative man of his day, can help to shed considerable light upon the sorts of needs, anxieties and pleasures of the generation whose shared value system, shaken by the Boer War, was to be fragmented for ever by the Great War to come.