The Poetry of Henry Newbolt

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Admirals All and the Diamond Jubilee

Admirals all, for England’s sake,
Honour be yours and fame!
And honour, as long as waves shall break,
To Nelson’s peerless name!

Most appropriately, it was on the anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar (October 21) in 1897 that Newbolt’s first collection of poetry, *Admirals All*, appeared as the eighth number in a series of slender chapbooks called *The Shilling Garland*, edited by Laurence Binyon and published by Elkin Mathews. Most of the poetry had already appeared in newspapers or periodicals, and so in all probability there was a certain ready audience of those who had enjoyed the individual poems, but even so, the book was greeted with an extraordinary and unexpected acclaim, which is made all the more astonishing if we consider that it was the first collection of a relatively new poet and that it contained only twelve poems. The success was practically instantaneous, and it propelled Newbolt into an almost overnight fame, running through four editions in two weeks, and twenty-one editions before his next collection, *The Island Race*, came out a year later.

The patriotic nature of the poems was at once taken up approvingly by the critics, with very few adverse reviews of the collection. The *Times*, for instance, described it as “a group of stirring ballads, written by a man
who has spirit and force, and who employs them in proclaiming the very sound doctrine that the safety of England depends upon a strong Navy."  

And the *Spectator*, holding up Kipling as the inevitable yardstick by which each new “patriotic” poet was measured at that time, welcomed this new recruit to “the band of modern ballad-writers” with “the greatest possible pleasure”:

Mr. Newbolt has done a notable thing. He has managed to write ballads full of ring and go, and also full of patriotic feeling, without imitating Mr. Rudyard Kipling. Those who have made any study of the later developments of our patriotic poetry will know how considerable is this achievement. . . . Mr. Newbolt knows how to be a patriotic poet without forgetting that a poet, to be worth anything, must be individual, must be himself, not an echo, however melodious. Hence we read his verse with real delight and without being haunted by another voice.²

Even as late as 1914, George Sampson remembered vividly the unexpectedness of that eighth *Shilling Garland* in an article in the *Bookman*:

... Mr. Elkin Mathews has often dealt cunningly and wisely in shillingsworths; and in the midway of the sad, bad nineties, began to issue a “Garland” at that easy price—slim paper booklets, the verse, too, rather slender and anaemic, as the fashion then was. . . . All the more surprising was it, then, that Number VIII. of the shilling “Garland” was the salt and racy “Admirals All and Other Verses, by Henry Newbolt.” Tyrtaeus had arisen in the land of bibelots. Among the minor poets there appeared something rather like a major prophet.³

The poems were learned by heart, chanted, and sung across England, the Empire, and beyond, with American periodicals as well as English taking most of his poetic work during the next year. In his 1906 biography of Leslie Stephen, for instance, F. W. Maitland tells of “one of his daughters” (Vanessa or Virginia) remembering how her father “shouted Mr. Henry Newbolt’s ‘Admirals All’ at the top of his voice as he went about the house or walked in Kensington Gardens, to the surprise of nurserymaids and park-keepers.”⁴ Soldiers carried copies of his poems through campaigns in South Africa and elsewhere, reading them round campfires and in hospitals, and, Newbolt recalled, “The time even came when Ministers quoted me in the House, and Bishops recited me in sermons at St. Paul’s before the King and Queen.”⁵ Still at the Bar (which he was soon to leave on the strength of his first two books) in 1897–1898 and busy writing the poems for *The Island Race*, Newbolt was overwhelmed
by the mass of correspondence that came at him from all quarters of the
globe, but, if he was a trifle dizzy, he could hardly complain at such a
very smooth and fast road to fame and success. As he himself said: "no
poems ever went their way more completely 'without tears' than mine."6

This was a period when not merely the upper levels of society, but
also a large proportion of the middle and working-classes were literate,
many viewing reading as a prime leisure-time activity and having,
indeed, more leisure-time in which to read and more income to spend
on it. Those in this potentially huge audience tended to have very definite
feelings as to what they did not like and a very partisan adherence to
what they did. Henley and Kipling, for instance, had already proved that
they liked patriotic poetry. Barrack Room Ballads was a great success
when it was published in collected form in 1892, as was Henley's
anthology of heroic and patriotic poetry, Lyra Heroica, published in
1891. The preface by Henley goes some way towards showing the kind
of sentiment likely to prove popular at that time:

My purpose has been to choose and sheave a certain number of those achieve­
ments in verse, which, as expressing the simpler sentiments and the more
elemental emotions, might fitly be addressed to such boys—and men for that
matter—as are privileged to use our noble English tongue.

To set forth, as only art can, the beauty and the joy of living, the beauty and the
blessedness of death, the glory of battle and adventure, the nobility of devo­
tion—to a cause, an ideal, a passion even—the dignity of resistance, the sacred
quality of patriotism, that is my ambition here. 7

In 1897, two weeks after Admirals All was published, Joseph Chamber­
lain was installed as Rector of Glasgow University, and his address was
printed in full in the Times of November 4: it was on the theme of
patriotism. In 1897 also, Elgar wrote the blatantly patriotic The Banner
of St. George, which he followed up with Pomp and Circumstance
Marches Nos. 1 and 2 in 1901 and the Coronation Ode (in which "Land
of Hope and Glory" appears) in 1902. Newbolt was not, in any sense,
writing into a vacuum. Yet neither this fact, nor the very wide potential
reading audience, quite explains his initial runaway success, for even at
this particular time, to sell 21,000 copies of a "little pamphlet of twelve
pieces . . . in a blue sugar-paper cover"8 by a virtually unknown poet in
the space of one year was quite unusual.
Of course success is an evasive animal at the best of times, and it is never possible to rationalise its presence or absence to a total degree, yet there are certain speculations to be made in this case, which together may help to explain why a now-forgotten poet once spoke directly not only to aristocracy, clergy, and intellectuals, but also to the man in the street and the rough end of the British Army. One hint comes in George Sampson's setting the "salt and racy" Newbolt poems against the "slender and anaemic" verses then fairly prevalent. Herbert Palmer, in *Post Victorian Poetry*, concurs in no uncertain terms:

When Newbolt arose in the firmament of Swinburne and the Decadents and Aesthetes, he was veritably a new bolt, and if not exactly like lightning, it was as if a great sea-wind had smitten the drooping lilies and roses and told even the rhapsodical Aphrodite to pack and begone. Here was health! Here was the great music! Here was courage and sinew! Here were all the healing patriotic ardours! Such was its effect upon surfeited readers of the latest vogues. 9

It was not, of course, that there were no other poets writing strong, invigorating poetry (apart from Kipling, there were Hardy, Yeats and Housman, after all). But as Palmer intimates, there was a surfeit of escapist romance and drooping lilies and roses being published in books, pamphlets, periodicals, and newspapers at that time. The literary renaissance of the first half of the nineties—symbolised, among others, by Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, *The Yellow Book*, and *The Savoy*—had degenerated into decadence, and the so-called "Yellow Press" (slaking an apparently inexhaustible thirst for sensational, romantic literature and jingoistic journalism) was in the ascendancy. Poetic language, in the hands of a host of Pre-Raphaelite camp followers and would-be-aesthetes, had tended to become cloying, precious, and overly ornate, while the subject matter was often viewed as sentimental and trivial. When into the midst of these delicate pieces came sailing ballads with the clean lines and salty, masculine tang of "The Fighting Téméraire," it might indeed have seemed as if a fresh wind was blowing:

It was eight bells ringing,
For the morning watch was done,
And the gunner's lads were singing
As they polished every gun.
It was eight bells ringing,
And the gunner's lads were singing,
For the ship she rode a-swinging
  As they polished every gun.

Oh! to see the linstock lighting,
    Téméraire! Téméraire!
Oh! to hear the round shot biting,
    Téméraire! Téméraire!
Oh! to see the linstock lighting,
And to hear the round shot biting,
For we're all in love with fighting
    On the Fighting Téméraire.

It was noontide ringing,
    And the battle just begun,
When the ship her way was winging
  As they loaded every gun.
It was noontide ringing,
When the ship her way was winging
And the gunner's lads were singing
  As they loaded every gun.

There'll be many grim and gory,
    Téméraire! Téméraire!
They'll be few to tell the story,
    Téméraire! Téméraire!
There'll be many grim and gory,
There'll be few to tell the story,
But we'll all be one in glory
    With the Fighting Téméraire.

There's a far bell ringing
    At the setting of the sun,
And a phantom's voice is singing
    Of the great days done.
There's a far bell ringing,
And a phantom voice is singing
Of renown for ever clinging
    To the great days done.

Now the sunset breezes shiver,
    Téméraire! Téméraire!
And she's fading down the river,
This is a poem whose swinging rhythms and marching repetitions make it almost demand to be read aloud, a far cry from the hushed, drawing-room poetry that might so often have surrounded it in 1897. The move from the straightforward recounting of the action aboard the ship to the muted impressions of the Turner painting (*The Fighting Téméraire Tugged to her Last Berth*) in the last two stanzas is unexpectedly subtle, giving the whole poem a highly satisfying, yet unpredictable shape. It is a poem that is at once robust and musical:

No, it is not feminine, shot through as it is with assumptions of heroic deaths and past glories; this is a song of reassuring maleness, of English greatness, and, more particularly, of the greatness of the English Navy. This critic is referring, however, not merely to the Turneresque impressionism of the last stanza, but of Newbolt’s use of feminine rhyme endings throughout the poem. These two-syllable rhymes increase the sense of movement and vigour and help, by their contrast, to emphasise the word *Téméraire*, which of course has a masculine ending. The strong, three-stress lines obtain their dancingly musical quality both through the mainly feminine rhymes and through the use of the two unstressed syllables with which each line begins. The poem’s structure is built on a ballad-like use of repetition: the second half of each stanza repeats the first, but with the second line omitted and a new third line. Newbolt’s noted technical facility is nowhere more evident than in the way in which he gets his sea-songs to sing through his use of rhythm, rhyme and repetition.

Half the poems in *Admirals All* had to do with England’s sea history, with Elizabethan adventurers, with “the Nelson touch,” and this must have seemed a particularly unsullied reinforcement of England’s glory...
at a time when the continued Imperial campaigns (though these also have their place in the book) were beginning to cause some people concern. This was now a time in which the strongly shared belief system of the mid-Victorian age was starting to be weakened by individual questioning, but there was not yet any widespread move either to upset or totally to reject communally-held values, and so when these were expressed in an acceptable form, as they were in Newbolt's nautical ballads, people may rather naturally have been relieved. For the poems were reminders of past victories that really had seemed to be fights for freedom and justice, and of past heroes whose courage and honour were felt to be inspiring and unquestionable. The first piece in the book was the title poem, "Admirals All," subtitled "A Song of Sea Kings." It begins:

Effingham, Grenville, Raleigh, Drake,  
Here's to the bold and free!  
Benbow, Collingwood, Byron, Blake,  
Hail to the Kings of the Sea!  
Admirals all, for England's sake,  
Honour be yours and fame!  
And honour, as long as waves shall break,  
To Nelson's peerless name!

Stanzas evoking the exploits of Essex, Drake, Duncan and Nelson follow, and the poem ends:

Admirals all, they said their say  
(The echoes are ringing still),  
Admirals all, they went their way  
To the haven under the hill.  
But they left us a kingdom none can take,  
The realm of the circling sea,  
To be ruled by the rightful sons of Blake  
And the Rodneys yet to be.

Admirals all, for England's sake,  
Honour be yours and fame!  
And honour, as long as waves shall break,  
To Nelson's peerless name!

It is no wonder that Leslie Stephen startled the nursery-maids and park-keepers in Kensington Gardens with that ballad. The poem neatly
underscores its expression of historical continuity through its use of Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break," whose third stanza begins: "And the stately ships go on / To their haven under the hill." But here, there is none of Tennyson's regret for time passing. The alternate four-stress/three-stress lines of the poem combine the rolling gait of a sea shanty with affirmations of the continued glory of English history and of the virtues of courage and honour in the service of freedom that so many Victorians wanted to believe in.

"Admirals All" was followed by "San Stefano" (subtitled "A Ballad of the Bold 'Menelaus'")), which had the refrain:

She'd a right fighting company, three hundred men and more,
Nine and forty guns in tackle running free;
And they cheered her from the shore for her colours at the fore,
When the bold Menelaus put to sea.

And there was also "Hawke," swooping from the West on the hapless French, with only one possible result:

The Frenchmen turned like a covey down the wind
When Hawke came swooping from the West;
One he sank with all hands, one he caught and pinned,
And the shallows and the storm took the rest.
The guns that should have conquered us they rusted
on the shore,
The men that would have mastered us they drummed and
marched no more,
For England was England, and a mighty brood she bore
When Hawke came swooping from the West.

Both of those poems make good use of juxtaposing three strong stresses: "She'd a right fighting company;" "The Frenchmen turned." Both use pauses in the musical sense of "rests": "Nine and forty guns—in tackle running free." And both employ heptameters interspersed with either pentameters or hexameters, which allow plenty of time for the shifts in rhythm that are a part of the pleasure of these poems.

There is no doubt, however, that the most famous, most anthologised, and longest remembered nautical ballad from this collection was "Drake's Drum." This was the first poem that Newbolt had chosen to show Robert Bridges the second time he met him at his house in
Yattendon, after Bridges had asked if he might see some of Newbolt's verse. "[H]e was silent and absorbed," Newbolt remembered:

At last he murmured, as if unconscious of my existence, "Awfully swell, awfully swell." I held my breath while he read it again with great deliberation. Then he looked at me and said, "You'll never write anything better than that—it isn't given to man to write anything better than that. I wish I had ever written anything half so good." 11

It was Bridges who subsequently recommended Newbolt to Laurence Binyon, so this, in effect, is the poem that launched Newbolt's poetic career.

The springboard for the poem was the so-called "State drum" (actually little more than a side-drum), with the arms of Sir Francis Drake painted upon it, which was kept at the Drake family seat of Buckland Abbey in Devonshire. But again, it is the continuity of English tradition and history that is at the heart of the poem:

Drake he's in his hammock an' a thousand mile away,
(Capten, art tha sleepin' there below?),
Slung atween the round shot in Nombre Dios Bay,
An' dreamin' arl the time o'Plymouth Hoe.

Yamder lumes the island, yamder lie the ships,
Wi' sailor lads a-dancin' heel-an'-toe,
An' the shore lights flashin', and the night-tide dashin',
He sees et arl so plainly as he saw et long ago.

Drake he was a Devon man, an' riled the Devon seas,
(Capten, art tha sleepin' there below?),
Rovin' tho' his death fell, he went wi' heart at ease,
An' dreamin' arl the time o'Plymouth Hoe.

"Take my drum to England, hang et by the shore,
Strike et when your powder's runnin' low;
If the Dons sight Devon, I'll quit the port o'Heaven,
An' drum them up the Channel as we drummed them long ago."

Drake he's in his hammock till the great Armadas come,
(Capten, art tha sleepin' there below?),
Slung atween the round shot, listenin' for the drum,
An' dreamin' arl the time o'Plymouth Hoe.
Call him on the deep sea, call him up the Sound,
Call him when ye sail to meet the foe;
Where the old trade's plyin' an' the old flag flyin'
They shall find him ware an' wakin', as they
found him long ago!

This poem was singled out by every reviewer of Admirals All and of The Island Race (in which the original twelve poems were reprinted) as being among the best of the poems, or, in many cases, as being the best poem of all. Even the dissenting Athenaeum critic grudgingly admitted that here was a ballad that was also a poem: "It is not a very remarkable poem, but it is a poem; for it has a sense of the beauty of heroic things...."12 One critic wrote that it was "certainly one of the best sea-songs in the language,"13 while another thought it struck the keynote of 1898 patriotic poetry, and that it was a "magnificent song . . . which will ensure [Newbolt] a place in all future anthologies. . . ."14 It remained a favourite for a long time and is the poem for which he is probably best known; indeed, a great many of the allusions to Newbolt in dictionaries of biography and the like will begin, "Sir Henry Newbolt (author of 'Drake's Drum')." Certainly the poem represents particularly successfully what Newbolt wished his poetry to say and to do, and it is therefore a very useful example of what it was that his readers were responding to when they read him.

Technically, it is an extremely well-crafted poem. In one sense, its form is similar to a conventional ballad's, with its alternating four and three-stress lines, though the second quatrains in each octave breaks this pattern by using four stresses. But its meter is certainly unusual, the poem being predominantly in first paeonic meter (one long, followed by three short stresses), "Dráke he’s in his hámmock an’ a thóusand mile away," with the use of spondaic substitutions, "slling atween the round shót...." The rhyme scheme is held together by the use of the "ow" sound in every other line. The first lines of each stanza begin similarly, and the second and fourth lines of each stanza remain the same throughout the poem, as, with variation, does the end of the eighth line. There is an internal rhyme in line seven of each stanza, and a great use of assonance, especially on the "ee" sound: he’s/sleeping/atween/dreamin'/heel/sees, and so on. All of this gives the poem its very compact and contained structural feeling, but also its pace and energy.
In his effort to convey his message of the important continuity of certain moral traits and virtues, Newbolt sometimes allowed the central idea to crush the poetry, but not here. He sometimes, too, weakened the universality of his message by aiming it at too reduced an audience, as in certain of the public school poems, but this is a poem that could speak to a very wide readership, across classes and across time. A modern critic, J. A. V. Chapple, sees it as being both representative of its age and deserving of its reputation:

Narrative, open drama ('Capten, art tha sleepin' there below?'), sentiment and the evocation of a people's historical continuity are a potent recipe for popularity, giving this particular poem more claim to stand as a witness of the culture in which it was born. Its continuing popularity until very recent years is a sign how such literature helps preserve certain characteristics of society and transmit them to future generations.\(^{15}\)

Newbolt would have been delighted with that comment, as it reflects precisely what he was trying to do in this poem (and in many others): to preserve characteristics that he saw as having great value and to transmit them both to his own and to future generations.

It is the spirit of Drake that he is suggesting lives on, waiting only for a time of crisis and danger, such as was posed by the Armada, to awaken again and come to England's aid. In fact, the "open drama" of that small, insistent voice—"Capten, art tha sleepin' there below?"—is that it simultaneously plants a niggling worry that Drake might possibly not be there at all ("Captain, are you there?") and plants the notion that he is not merely there, but wide awake and listening. One half expects a thundering answer to come booming up from the open hatch—in broad Devon, of course. For although Newbolt rarely used dialect (another conspicuous departure from Kipling), the Devon dialect evoked in the poem is wonderfully authentic, as anyone who has listened to a genuine Devon accent—not the rent-a-yokel accents of television and film—would agree. Dialect is always a risky literary tool, but it works in this poem because it is quirkily authentic, because it gives to Drake and his spirit a very individual, spicy flavour, and because it never goes so far as to interfere with the reading of the piece.

The world of the long-ago Drake is convincingly but impressionistically drawn, and the idea that he is sailing somewhere on the seas beyond human sight, waiting to be called into reality, is most appealing. Appeal-
ing, too, is the metaphor of the drum—the notion that history leaves us symbols that we can invoke in times of need to call up the spirits of our ancestors and invest the living with their virtues. George Sampson, in the 1914 *Bookman* article, found the unimposing drum on exhibit in Buckland Abbey a “rather feeble fact” compared to the “inspiriting metaphor” engendered in the poem:

> Its beat is to be heard in the heart, not in the ears. And there is no need to ask for it. It is scarcely ever silent. Its summons to the spirit of the race can be heard in the call of need or the whisper of danger, in the stories of great struggles or the songs of old heroes. Drake’s drum beats very vigorously in “Drake’s Drum.”

Many, indeed, found the beat of the drum so vigorous they believed they could hear its sound, and the poem did acquire an almost legendary quality from the day of its first printing. In January 1896, the unsuccessful “Jameson raid” in the Transvaal, in which Jameson had been ignominiously beaten by Kruger’s forces, provoked a telegram of congratulations from the German Kaiser to Kruger, which so outraged the British (the Kaiser was, after all, Queen Victoria’s grandson) that they immediately got up a flying squadron and sent it to sea on January 16 in case of any further opposition. On the eve of its sailing, “Drake’s Drum” was printed for the first time in the *St. James’s Gazette*, and its initial impact was not a little helped by the fact that the flying squadron’s flagship was the *Revenge* and her Marines were commanded by a certain Captain Drake R.M. As Newbolt walked home from Lincoln’s Inn on the day of publication, he had the enormous pleasure of seeing on the *Gazette’s* placards in every street just two words in huge capitals: “DRAKE’S DRUM.” It was, as he himself said, “as it were the beat of the drum made visible.”

And the legendary quality remained with the poem for quite some time. In March 1916, Newbolt wrote to Alice Hylton: “One thing that has given me pleasure is the news . . . that in Plymouth it is reported that Drake’s Drum has been heard! Write me down an Ass, if you will, or a dullard, or an Aggravating Argumentative Ambécile, but remember to add that I did give my Country a Legend of real value.” And later, in 1919, he received letters from two separate correspondents—Commodore (later Admiral) Luce and Lady Glenconner—reporting that a mysterious sound like a drum beat had been heard aboard the battleship,
Royal Oak, while she was involved with the acceptance of the German Fleet's surrender, for which, after a thorough search, no explanation could be found. Both correspondents, and the officers who heard it, thought immediately of "Drake's Drum."19

This poem epitomised what people were responding to when they read Admirals All so avidly because of that quality in it that also caused the legends to grow around it. The poem does not merely tell of Drake's drum; it becomes, in a curious way, the drum itself, the agent by which the spirit of Drake is called up. And what people may well have been responding to in this and in other poems in the book was not merely the swinging, rhythmic energy, but also the feeling that a call had gone out for a return to (or at least continuation of) the values, the moral virtues, the ideals of English heroes such as Drake, who had come to stand for a particularly inspiring life-code.

It seems likely, too, that one of the reasons for the success of Admirals All was that its content spoke to the need of many of its readers for certainty and faith in an age of increasing doubt and questioning, offering them symbols of stability, continuity, and tradition to counterbalance the sometimes bewildering changes that seemed to accelerate as the century drew to its close. Introducing the first volume of his study of the middle classes during this period, The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud, Peter Gay notes:

In the nineteenth century . . . the very nature of change underwent a change; it was more rapid and more irresistible than in the past. It was also strikingly uneven: advances in the natural sciences did not automatically generate improved medical treatment; the gathering of social information did not quickly eventuate in social reform. And time-honored social arrangements, like family life, were torn by the clash of new needs and old habits. Hence change in the nineteenth century was often more unsettling than exhilarating.20

In their biography of H. G. Wells, Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie see such change as culminating in what they term the "Age of Anxiety" that began in the 1880s:

It was such anxiety that threw up the great Questions that dominated the last years of Victoria's long reign—the Industrial Question and the Irish Question, the Land Question and the Health and Housing Question, the emerging Woman Question, the Imperial Question, and, slowly looming, the German Question. The search for answers stimulated an array of new organisations and campaigns
in the Eighties, advocating remedies with missionary enthusiasm in an effort to replace what was lost when science snapped the thread of revealed religion. The idea of progress served for a time. The vulgarisation of Darwin’s theories had fused with concepts of competition and free enterprise to make Englishmen feel that the Hidden Hand of Providence was guiding their improving destiny. But by 1880 the Hidden Hand seemed less sure in its touch, and the aching doubt which lay behind the certainties of Protestant dogmatism was searching again for an assurance of salvation.

Many people still believed that the changes occurring in science, in industry, in Empire, in the social order, were to the good, and the fin de siècle mood of the late 1880s and the 1890s generated a heady expectation that a new order and a new age were about to burst forth. Indeed, as Holbrook Jackson points out in his still illuminating 1913 study, The Eighteen Nineties, the adjective “new” was itself felt to be a sign of modernity and was applied to a wide range of subjects. There was l’art nouveau, of course, but also New Hedonism, New Fiction, New Paganism, New Spirit, New Humour, New Realism, New Drama, New Unionism, New Party, New Woman, and the journals, The New Age and The New Review (the last having its name changed from The National Observer).

But the same mood also produced deep feelings of uncertainty as to whether this new age was to be welcomed for its regeneration or dreaded as a destroyer of traditional values and beliefs. “[T]he fact must not be overlooked,” says Jackson, “that much of the vitality of the period, much even of its effective vitality, was destructive of ideas and conventions which we had come to look upon as more or less permanent.” Hence, expressions of confidence and certainty, of faith in the old order, of unity and tradition, were likely to be seized upon with a certain sense of relief by those troubled by the changes they perceived around them, as the response of the populace to the Jubilee years of 1887 and 1897 helps to demonstrate. The Diamond Jubilee had, in fact, been celebrated only four months before Admirals All was published, and the explosion of mass loyalty to the Crown and to the Empire had resulted in riotous and tumultuous celebrations in towns and villages all over the country. Patriotic feeling ran almost hysterically high during this time, as if the united fervour that it engendered was itself something tangible that might ward off any impending crisis at the dawn of the twentieth century.
To accept wholly the labelling of this period of time as the "Age of Anxiety" is perhaps to simplify matters a little, as Newbolt's own attitude (and that of others who thought as he did) reminds us. There was certainty as well as doubt, and confidence as well as anxiety, so that it might better be thought of as an age of ambivalent responses in the face of continued and increasing change. The fervent strength of the crowds who demonstrated their loyalty to their queen in June 1897 did not in any straightforward way betoken anxiety, but neither did it betoken confidence. Rather, it expressed the desire for confidence, as people found in the continuation of the existence of both Queen and Empire a measure of the reassurance that they sought. And when Newbolt gave them *Admirals All* such a short time later, the book may well have prompted the response it did because it, too, was another such symbol of continuity and tradition, and thus touched off another expression of the need for confidence and for reassurance. What it clearly did was to present values that were shared by a great number of people at that time, for as Newbolt was to write in a later essay ("What is Poetry?") sometimes the reasons that readers are drawn to a particular artist are that they are looking

for something that will help them to a fuller life, and they demand of him not merely that he shall excel in expression, but that he shall excellently express feelings such as they can understand and value. They demand that he shall chant to them, for example, their own morality, their own religion, their own patriotism.24

And this, it seems, is what Newbolt did, both in the ballads of the sea and in those about more recent history. For while the spirits of English admirals reinforced past glories, Newbolt also provided colourful reinforcement of continuing tradition in the book by the ballads of Empire that were printed alongside the nautical ballads. There was "The Guides at Cabul, 1879," relating how loyal Afghan troops fought their own people rather than be disloyal to their dead British officers, and there was "A Ballad of John Nicholson," which tells how Nicholson put the rebellious captain of the Rajah of Jalândhar in his place, extolling the virtue of strength, and not pride, if peace was to be kept. There were also two ballads, "Vital Lampada" and "He Fell Among Thieves," that deliberately juxtapose notions of school and of home with that of service to the Empire. These are interesting because they are the first poems to
so clearly and overtly exhibit the Clifton ethos of the value of the chivalric ideal as applied to modern life, and also because they so manifestly represent a Victorian rather than a post-Boer War Edwardian sensibility.

If “Drake’s Drum” is the most famous poem in this collection, then “Vitaï Lampada” is the most notorious. Whenever Newbolt is being exhibited as a straw man, or used as an Aunt Sally, it is “Vitaï Lampada” that is held up to ridicule. And yet, at the time of publication, it rivalled “Drake’s Drum” for popularity, acquiring a legendary status of its own, and following Newbolt around for the rest of his life, long after his own views on poetry had grown and changed. “If it must go down to my credit,” he said in 1916, “I hope that posterity won’t take it for my idea of poetry! as ‘to be or not to be, that is the question’ is commonly supposed to be W.S.’s.” And in 1923, incessantly dogged by it on a very successful tour of Canada, he was writing about the poem, half in genuine exasperation: “it’s a kind of Frankenstein’s Monster that I created thirty years ago and now I find it falling on my neck at every street corner! In vain do I explain what is Poetry: they roar for ‘Play up’....”

“Vitaï Lampada” is representative of Newbolt both at his most popular and (later) at his most scorned, and it is, therefore, like “Drake’s Drum,” a key poem in this study:

There’s a breathless hush in the Close to-night—
    Ten to make and the match to win—
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
    An hour to play and the last man in.
And it’s not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
    Or the selfish hope of a season’s fame,
But his Captain’s hand on his shoulder smote—
    “Play up! play up! and play the game!”

The sand of the desert is sodden red,—
    Red with the wreck of a square that broke;—
The Gatling’s jammed and the Colonel dead,
    And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.
The river of death has brimmed his banks,
    And England’s far, and Honour a name,
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:
“Play up! play up! and play the game!”

This is the word that year by year,
While in her place the School is set,
Every one of her sons must hear,
And none that hears it dares forget.
This they all with a joyful mind
Bear through life like a torch in flame,
And falling fling to the host behind—
“Play up! play up! and play the game!”

Here again is a poem concerned with the handing on of a tradition that is seen as being of the highest value and importance. “Vitaï Lampada” means “Torch of Life” and comes from Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*, where it refers to a relay race in which each runner passes his torch on to another. Here Newbolt is handing on to his readers the chivalric ideals of courage, loyalty, honour, and self-sacrifice that were taught to him, and doing this in the form of a poem that exemplifies just why and how these ideals are, and should be, handed on.

The poem makes its point by first showing how the meaning of honour may be learned by concrete example on a school cricket pitch, when, against increasing odds and tension, the last batsman of the match must give his all to the team, without thought of personal glory. The scene then shifts to the world beyond school, to a distant and bloody outpost of Empire,27 where our young batsman, or any other member of that great team he represents, is now (with his colonel newly dead) in sudden command of a desperately beleaguered regiment but in no doubt about the value of what he learned on that school cricket pitch. He exhibits the qualities of leadership that his Cricket Captain exhibited to him and rallies the troops with the same, strong call to honour. When we return to the school, it is with evidence of the validity of the greatest lesson that can be learned there, a lesson that must be passed from each generation to the one coming up behind it. The overall shape of the poem is thus neatly and compactly formed, with its moves out from the school and back to it again, and from specific images to a general broader conclusion. It is written in iambic tetrameters and feels somewhat over-regular in its beat, in spite of numerous anapestic substitutions. But the use of the eight-line, double-ballad stanza (a very popular and common narra-
tive stanza of the time) moves the poem along smartly, building the pace towards that important, last, reiterated line.

"[V]ery cleverly has Mr. Newbolt handled his subject," said the Spectator reviewer of this poem, and thousands at the time agreed with him, yet it is exactly the way in which Newbolt handled his subject that causes most people today to disagree profoundly with that reviewer and to vilify the poet who could present them with "ideas which seem to them to be rubbish, expressed in language which sounds to them very like gibberish." We do not find the romping ballad form complementary to the ideas being expressed, and, furthermore, it is precisely the move out from the school cricket pitch to the desert engagement that we react against, finding the equating of cricket and war an inexcusable reduction of the seriousness of war, and then finding the move back to the school deflatingly anti-climactic. What accounted, then, for the poem’s great popularity in the late 1890s?

T. C. Worsley felt that Newbolt—"the high-priest of this period"—drew what was then a correct parallel between the playing field and the battlefield. While noting that Newbolt’s poetry is no longer taken seriously (Worsley was writing this in 1940), he reminds his readers that "it was serious then. It was written and read and admired by adults, and it represented a feeling which actual results seemed to substantiate. We must, for this purpose, take Newbolt seriously, because he expressed quite perfectly the feelings and the moral temper of this period—the Golden Age of the Public Schools—and set the tone for some time to come." This does not mean that we may not judge either the values being expressed, or the aesthetic quality of the poem; we have a perfect right to look back and judge the values and tastes of an earlier age. But while we may even judge it using criteria that ensure an adverse verdict on the poem, we cannot dismiss the fact that a great number of intelligent and well-educated adults enjoyed the poem because it expressed values they wished to uphold and to share.

For there was a different perception of war at this time, which had not yet been substantially affected by the tremors of doubt that the Boer War caused and which was a long way off from the almost total change it underwent in World War I. We will later examine this different perception, but it is pertinent to include here an historian’s view of this period’s idea of war as it relates to this particular poem. On beginning a discussion
about the British army and the tribesmen it faced in Africa in the 1880s
and 1890s, Lawrence James, in *The Savage Wars*, quotes the first two
stanzas of "Vitaì Lampada." He goes on to say:

Sir Henry Newbolt’s verses are perhaps the most well-known reaction to an
imperial battle in Africa, although they have been derided by subsequent
generations which recognized few if any signs of sportsmanship in the mass
slaughter of total war and found the comparison distasteful. Yet by making the
battlefield the complement of the cricket pitch, Newbolt gave permanence to
some of the deepest sentiments cherished by late-Victorian and Edwardian
officers. War and sport shared a common ground, for they called for the same
moral and physical qualities. Gallantry, nerve, self-control, fitness and cheer­
fulness in the face of setbacks were the highest attainments of the imperial
warrior, and they were also the virtues which marked him out at the crease or
in the steeplechase field. Above all there was the moral discipline which insisted
that, whether in sport or war, the game was played fairly, cleanly and according
to the rules.31

This notion of fair play, of playing according to the rules of the game,
is central to the conceptions of honour, loyalty, service, and war preva­
 lent at the time, and there were definite yardsticks by which fair play
was measured. Equations between team games and soldiering were
therefore the norm, not the exception, because it was on the cricket pitch
and the football field that the discipline involved in playing by the rules
was first learned, and on the battlefield that these rules were seen to have
value. The fact that we may argue that it was not fair play to annihilate
tribesmen armed with spears by turning machine guns on them is not the
point here. The point is that the British Army was perceived as playing
by very definite rules, evolving from a moral code in which the heroic
virtues of loyalty to the “team,” leadership, self-sacrifice, endurance,
courage, etc., were revered, and where evidence of conscious self-ad­
 vancement, bragging, letting down the team, cowardice and the like led
to condemnation and cries of “it’s not cricket.”

Newbolt’s schoolboy of the second stanza is exhibiting all those
heroic virtues because he believes that playing by the rules of the game
is of crucial importance—of more importance than winning the
game—if honour is to be upheld. Newbolt’s rallying cry might set a later
generation’s teeth on edge, but it was a cry gladly taken up at the time
because it seemed to embody exactly what it was that inspired men, both
leaders and followers, to action. J. H. Grainger, in discussing this poem, reminds us of this fact:

Yet given the exigency, given the necessity of standing and fighting, given the alternative, what better cultural resources could officers bring to the engagement? It was a battlefield not a garden, a place for action not for contemplation, for resistance not reception. . . . "Lowly valour" did respond to boyish will trained on autumnal playing fields. Newbolt was merely being the practical patriot, seeking those words which, in an archetypical situation, might help rather than harm action.32

Near the end of the Boer War, for instance, a letter from a certain Revd. H. J. Rose, an army chaplain, appeared in the Spectator. Rose revealed the effects that this poem had when read to soldiers at the front: "Over and over again, the sick man wasted by wounds and disease; the strong man, doomed to inaction on the lines of communication; the man at the very front, almost within range of the enemy’s fire—has been nerved and cheered 'to play the game', against all odds."33

Newbolt was using words and symbols that would already be familiar and accessible to a broad readership, for sporting expressions and images were in common use during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, occurring in parliamentary speeches, in newspaper articles, in periodical literature, in popular novels and poetry, and elsewhere. Many outside the public schools would therefore understand the concept of "playing the game," have no trouble equating it with the brave young colonial officer, and find quite natural the use of the cricketing imagery. For those inside the public school system, the imagery would, of course, feel even more natural, speaking as it did the language of brotherhood and shared values, nostalgia and inspiration. Redolent with notions of corporate life, the metaphor of games was used during this period to draw together all those to whom it had come as an integral part of their education and to bind them, beyond their other differences, for life:

It is impossible to measure the impact of the verbal symbolism of athleticism . . . but those [symbols] of athleticism, it is suggested, both in the schools and in society, served to a greater rather than to a lesser extent as successful agents of socialisation, of social control and of social cohesion. In this way, they assisted in the development and reinforcement of individual role, collective habits and the institutional value system: they both created and reflected an ethos. They constituted, in short, a set of symbols for believing and acting.34
In “Vitaï Lampada,” Newbolt was employing symbols he knew would invoke and promote the ethos that he and many others of his generation believed in and acted upon. With little subtlety, but with clear language and intent, he reached his audience to powerful effect in this poem, partly, we must realise, because of its directness, and its lack of the overblown poetic language all too common at the time. It is one of Newbolt’s poems that has stood up least well to time, yet when it was first published it spoke to many people. And it spoke loudest to a fellowship who knew it to be an expression of the values—impersonal, objective, shared—that they believed had given to their own community, and also to England, the moral force and moral virtues that made for greatness and for honour.

“He Fell Among Thieves,” the second of the “school” poems, did not appear as one of original twelve poems but was included by the time the fifth edition came out only a month after the first. (Admirals All changed its choice of poems more than once.) This poem also expresses the values found in “Vitaï Lampada,” though with a less direct use of the symbolism of athleticism, and is interesting as a good example of Newbolt’s belief in the ballad form as a perfect way to show the values in action. In a later essay entitled “British Ballads,” he traced the development of English, Scottish and Border ballads from the primitive form of song, game and dance, through dialogue ballads for two voices, to the arrival of the four-line stanza that still uses repetition and parallelism, but now contains one voice telling a story:

It is evident that what has now been reached is a purely literary form—a form which has nothing to do with dancing, which does not need a chorus of voices, or a singing voice at all; a form adapted for plain recital, or even for the silence of the written or printed word. And this form is so simple and effective that it can be used for the telling of many different kinds of stories.35

And Newbolt, who delighted in telling stories, felt that the ballad was still a valid and powerful vehicle and used it extensively, particularly in his early work.

Based loosely on the story of the death of a young Lieutenant, George W. Hayward, “He Fell Among Thieves” tells of the last night of a young Englishman in Northern India, who is in the hands of a band of thieves who have granted him one night’s reprieve before they kill him at dawn. The situation is so set up as to allow “a compendium of heroic attitudes”
to be presented to the reader, as J. S. Bratton noted, in *The Victorian Popular Ballad.* The hero has been a guest and friend of the thieves who have then betrayed his trust by turning on him and robbing him of his possessions (their villainy accentuating his virtues), though not before he has proved his mettle by killing no less than five of their number. Left alone for the night (presumably having given his parole, as there is no thought of escape), he wastes no time in recrimination, nor indulges any fears, but turns his mind instead to that which inspired him, and broods “All night long in a dream untroubled by hope”:

He did not hear the monotonous roar that fills
The ravine where the Yassin river sullenly flows;
He did not see the starlight on the Laspur hills,
Or the far Afghan snows.

He saw the April noon on his books aglow,
The wistaria trailing in at the window wide;
He heard his father’s voice from the terrace below
Calling him down to ride.

He saw the gray little church across the park,
The mounds that hide the loved and honoured dead;
The Norman arch, the chancel softly dark,
The brasses black and red.

He saw the School Close, sunny and green,
The runner beside him, the stand by the parapet wall,
The distant tape, and the crowd roaring between
His own name over all.

He saw the dark wainscot and timbered roof,
The long tables, and the faces merry and keen;
The College Eight and their trainer dining aloof,
The Dons on the daïs serene.

These memories of precious things important to the unnamed hero are many of them drawn from images in Newbolt’s own life—the companion father he mourned, the little church at his wife’s home of Orchardleigh, the School Close at Clifton and the victorious finish of a race there, the Hall at Corpus—and though general and direct enough to ensure they may be shared, each image does conjure up a mental picture of its own and certainly serves to build for us a sure and English
background for our hero. He remembers last the ship he sailed out on, the flag she flew, and then it is dawn, and "strong on his feet" he breathes in the cool sweet morning air, and goes to face his murderers:

Light on the Laspur hills was broadening fast,
The blood-red snow-peaks chilled to a dazzling white:
He turned, and saw the golden circle at last,
Cut by the Eastern height.

"O glorious Life, Who dwellest in earth and sun,
I have lived, I praise and adore Thee."

A sword swept.

Over the pass the voices one by one
Faded, and the hill slept.

In spite of the quatrains with their common ABAB rhyme scheme, this poem does not have the usual alternating four- and three-stress lines of the traditional ballad, but uses three pentameters followed by a trimeter. This has the effect of lengthening and giving a quiet, reflective feel to the first three lines of each stanza, before returning to the short finality of the last line—a reminder of the inevitable outcome of the long night. An unusual rhythm is effected in the last stanza by the positioning of "A sword swept," and the diminuendo employed in the last two lines is well and musically done, even if there is a rather stiff and posed quality about the death.

"He Fell Among Thieves" encapsulates those heroic virtues that together formed the chivalric code by which the public school brotherhood of that era was bound. This young Englishman who dies far away in the Empire is shown to possess both physical and mental courage, a strong loyalty to his country, a sense of honour and trust, and an unquestioning acceptance of death based on a strongly held belief in God. And the poem takes as its centre the hero's remembrance of all that went to form these virtues in him, thus upholding both the virtues themselves, and the system and the country which inspired them. This makes the poem, as J. S. Bratton points out, a good example of an heroic ballad of the time:

A note of sentimental reminiscence is common in heroic ballads: the doughty soldier is moved and sustained by a tender recollection which represents the values he is fighting to preserve, and the occurrence of which proves his personal
possession of the heroic virtue. . . . [A]ll of the ballads which use the hero's boyhood (past or present) to intensify his bravery also dwell upon the picture of the old school, the beloved faces and the familiar fields. 37

We will further consider the nature of ballads, and particularly the nature of nineteenth-century heroic ballads, for they constitute a tradition into which "They Fell Among Thieves" fits quite naturally, along with the others from Newbolt's little Shilling Garland of poems.

This chapter has, however, concentrated exclusively on the early heroic ballads that appeared in Admirals All in an attempt to see what it was that Newbolt's enthusiastic readers were responding to and why the book so captured the imagination of the age. What has emerged is that the timing of the book was extremely auspicious and the influences from childhood and adolescence that formed Newbolt's belief system were ones in which many people still wished to trust. The ideals expressed in the book were those that people either did believe in or wanted to believe in, and the form in which they were expressed was one that was popular, easily understood, and, most importantly, one that was much enjoyed at the time.

These poems (and those of The Island Race) represent one of the last popular trends of poetry of the century, and one of the last to appear before the Boer War. This makes them, in fact and in effect, poems of the Victorian and not of the Edwardian era, for the Boer War is not merely a convenient division between the two periods, but the cause of shifts in sentiment that would help to inform the new reign. Newbolt is most often labelled an Edwardian poet, and although this is also true, it invites a judgment on his early (and initially most widely praised) poems that is based on historically wrong premises that allow the poems to be written off, particularly in the light of the progressive politics of the Edwardian Age, as hopelessly naive and simplistic. 1897 still belonged to an age of intense loyalty to Queen and country, to Empire and tradition, in which a kind of heroic patriotism both gave a needed reassurance and bound together a people increasingly concerned about the future. And Admirals All, coming out when it did, provoked a response that expressed this need, this desire, for a safe and familiar harbour across a disconcertingly misty sea.