

## Whitelands MayDay - 13 May 2023

*At all feasts where ale was strongest,  
Sat the merry monarch longest,  
First to come and last to go!  
Norway never yet had seen  
One so beautiful of mien,  
One so royal in attire,  
When in arms completely furnished,  
Harness gold-inlaid and burnished,  
Mantle like a flame of fire.*

A sartorial challenge for your May Monarch who will no doubt be royal in attire, even if without a mantle like a flame of fire!

The 28<sup>th</sup> May 2020 was the centenary of the death of Canon Rawnsley. To mark the occasion the lecture I was invited to give here as part of your MayDay festivities was, like the event itself, a casualty of the pandemic. I had entitled the lecture *Sat the Merry Monarch*, a reference to Longfellow's *Saga of King Olaf*, which some of you may have recognised from the extract I just read.

Anyway, before moving on to the subject of this brief talk, perhaps I should first introduce myself: I am the great-grand-daughter of the redoubtable Canon Hardwicke Drummond Rawnsley, and co-author with Dr. Michael Allen of the new biography of the Canon. This account of his life should have appeared in 2020 to mark the centenary of his death but was yet another casualty of the pandemic. However, since 2023 is exactly one hundred years since Rawnsley's widow published a memoir of her husband's life, long out of print. Michael Allen and I are very glad that although our publication was delayed, it has in the end been possible for us to publish it in time to mark that centenary.

So where does Rawnsley fit into the story of Whitelands? He was an ardent disciple of John Ruskin, whom he first met when he enrolled in 1870 as an undergraduate at Oxford, where Ruskin had recently been appointed Slade Professor of Fine Arts. I am sure that Ruskin needs no introduction here.

Ruskin's association with Whitelands began some seven years later in August 1877, when Whitelands was still a relatively young institution, having been founded as no doubt you know, as a Teacher Training College for women some 35 years earlier in 1841. How did that association come about?

Six years earlier Ruskin, already a celebrated art critic, writer and social commentator, had begun his monthly series of letters, published as *Fors Clavigera*, addressed to 'The Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain', in which he refined and clarified his thoughts on social justice. (How many of the said workmen and labourers actually read those letters is open to doubt, but *Fors* was hugely influential in other spheres of society, and would have been required reading for all persons with any intellectual pretensions.) *Fors* came to the attention of the recently

appointed Principal of Whitelands, the Reverend John Faunthorpe, and in 1877 he sent Ruskin a cheque for £5, a considerable sum at the time, to be used for the benefit of the Guild of St. George, Ruskin's somewhat utopian institution to encourage people to live closer to nature.

Ruskin, however, returned the cheque, suggesting that Faunthorpe could do with the money for the furtherance of his work in education, which in turn would better forward the interests of St. George's Guild.

Thus began what was to become a most fruitful association, lasting until Ruskin's death in 1901, and beyond. Faunthorpe and Ruskin seem to have crossed swords once or twice on the subject of education, on one occasion Ruskin daring to suggest that he knew more about teaching and training teachers than did the Principal of Whitelands!

In the 1850's Ruskin had introduced a May Queen Festival at a school in Cheshire. Now, having found a kindred spirit in Faunthorpe, he tried to interest him in the idea of starting something similar at Whitelands.

25<sup>th</sup> January 1881

“Suppose you should make it a custom that the scholars should annually choose by ballot... their Queen of May, and that the elected Queen give the *Proserpina* (Ruskin's latest book) to the girl she thought likeliest to use it with advantage? It would be a stimulus to me to get out another volume quickly.”

The Principal apparently informed Ruskin in subsequent correspondence that he thought of suggesting that one of the duties of the Queen should be to help others in some practical way, since Ruskin replied:

“My Dear Friend, I am mightily delighted by your concession to my romantic fancies... Your idea of entrusting the Queen with some queenly duties of helping others is very delightful also. In my first endeavour to get this notion realised; it was to be in a country town – the Queen was to choose two maiden colleagues – and with their advice and personal aid was to administer a certain sum annually to the poor of the town, for their better comfort and pleasure. I had nearly got this done by a girl who was a steady disciple of mine and rich. Her relations moved heaven and earth to stop it, and got it stopped until the girl fell in love with somebody who I suppose taught her to make better use of her money; for I have never heard of her since...”

Ruskin conceded though that in the ‘quieter and more dignified conditions’ which would likely pertain at Whitelands such a plan would likely have a better chance of success.

The first Whitelands May Queen Festival was held at the College's original Chelsea home in 1881, and has I understand been an annual event in various forms, ever since. In the interests of gender equality, after Whitelands became fully coeducational in 1966 I think, the event was in due course transformed into a May Monarch Festival.

Ruskin continued to take a great interest in the May Queen Festival at Whitelands until his death in 1901, each year presenting the Queen with a gold cross. In 1887 he asked the artist Kate Greenaway to design the dress to be worn by the May Queen, a photograph of which is in the College Archives – a cashmere smock embroidered with a border of pansies, worn over an

underskirt of moss-green silk. The cross, decorated with a sprig of hawthorn, designed by Arthur Severn is also visible in the picture.

After Ruskin's death Canon Rawnsley took over this tradition, arranging each year for the cross to be made by the craftsmen at the Keswick School of Industrial Arts. The cross was invariably accompanied by a sonnet composed by him for the occasion.

So who was Hardwicke Rawnsley?

My colleague Michael Allen and I had been working together for a number of years on a new and extended biography of Canon Rawnsley. A titan of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Rawnsley was a man who became, before the term was invented, a 'celebrity' in his own lifetime in many different fields, in public health, in education – he was a pioneer of co-education – a prolific writer, author of countless pamphlets, articles for journals, and hundreds of letters to the Press on every subject under the sun.

A household name during his lifetime, after his death Rawnsley faded from the collective memory, and is today principally remembered, if he is remembered at all, as one of the three founders of the National Trust and as the man largely responsible for saving the Lake District from despoliation by industrial railway lines and from unrestricted development.

However Rawnsley was far more than that: Vicar of Crosthwaite, Keswick for 34 years, he was renowned as an inspirational preacher unafraid to tread on the sensibilities of his audience; he was a Residentiary Canon of Carlisle Cathedral, and a chaplain to King George V; instigator and organiser of celebratory beacons nationwide for royal occasions; a social reformer and activist in public health; an enlightened educationist who supported co-education and learning from nature; the founder, with his talented wife Edith, of the Keswick School of Industrial Arts, one of the very first County Councillors, and arguably the very first conservationist.

He was in demand countrywide as a lecturer on a huge variety of topics; a minor Lakes poet; a disciple of John Ruskin as I said earlier, and a devotee of William Wordsworth, and of Tennyson, to whom he was distantly connected. He was the author of at least 40 books, including a dozen on the history, topography, literary associations and customs of Lakeland in lyrical prose seldom if ever equalled.

He was an active member of countless committees and a tireless campaigner, always leading from the front in whatever field his interest was engaged, an amateur archaeologist and photographer, and something of an expert on Herdwick sheep. A friend of Beatrix Potter, who published her first book thanks to his encouragement, Rawnsley fired her with his enthusiasms. She was an ardent supporter of his campaigns in Lakeland, becoming in due course the most important donor of land to the National Trust, bequeathing to the Trust the farms she had bought with the proceeds of her children's books. It was thanks in large part to Rawnsley's encouragement in the first place that Beatrix Potter had published *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, her first book.

In 1885, two years after his induction to the parish of Crosthwaite, Hardwicke, following Ruskin's lead of just four years earlier, introduced a May Queen Festival at Keswick – a young May Queen from one of the elementary schools was chosen each year by her fellow scholars, and dressed in white, with crown and sceptre of flowers, she rode through the streets of

Keswick. From then on, every year Hardwicke, as Master of Ceremonies, led the Queen's palfrey by the bridle at the head of the procession, followed by all the Bands of Hope in the neighbourhood, to the local park, where her Proclamation, urging kindness to animals and to nature, etc., almost certainly written by Hardwicke, was read, games and maypole dancing were organised and tea was served.

Ruskin, now living at Brantwood on Coniston Water, wrote:

My Dearest Rawnsley,

You have made this day snow-white for me and it began grey; with your lovely letter and the proclamation and the quite lovely poem, the best piece of sacred song I have read this many a day. God save you and help you in all you are doing... But you don't tell me how the Queen was elected. I have been tired in London and long to get near you again...

Ever your loving J. Ruskin.

Rawnsley had taken the idea of the May Queen Festival direct from Ruskin, so he would certainly have known about the festivities at Whitelands, though there is scant evidence of his actual attendance before 1917 when Princess Mary graced the occasion and the Whitelands College Annual records that among the guests were two poets – Sir Henry Newbolt and Canon Rawnsley. However in 1908 Miss Lily Severn, daughter of Joan Severn, Ruskin's cousin, housekeeper and amanuensis, in a speech given on behalf of her mother, said that her mother, 'feels how it would have pleased Ruskin that Canon Rawnsley should have carried out his wishes by giving a cross to the May Queen today', so it seems possible that he was present in person that year as well.

John Ruskin, William Wordsworth and his old headmaster Edward Thring of Uppingham were Rawnsley's principal heroes – Ruskin imbued him with his socialist principles (with a small 's') Wordsworth was his poetic muse, through whose eyes he first learned to appreciate the Lake District, and Edward Thring, who was himself no mean poet, through his example at Uppingham, inspired his advanced educational philosophy.

To the Queen of the May, Whitelands, May 1<sup>st</sup> (1919)<sup>o</sup>

Queen of the May! No happier Queen  
Was ever called to power.  
Yours is the right with heart serene  
To rule this peaceful hour.

No longer bark the dogs of war,  
No longer Tears are shed;  
Lo! To your kingdom from afar  
Troop home the happy dead;

And hark, with one accord they say

We died for life's increase  
That love should welcome in the May  
And all the world have peace.

And to end, here is the Tribute from the Whitelands Annual, 1920 (courtesy of your Archives)

“Hardwicke Drummond Rawnsley, Canon of Carlisle; Died at Grasmere, May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1920

It is fitting that we should remember with affectionate gratitude; in this Annual, one who ever honoured in word and deed the name of John Ruskin; and was a generous benefactor to the Whitelands May Festival. To the world at large Canon Rawnsley was well-known for his poems; and for his successful efforts to preserve from desecration some beautiful portions of the English Lake District. To the Whitelands May Queens he gave, for some years after Ruskin's death, a gold cross designed at the Keswick Art School, and to the end of his life he sent every new Queen some verses of his own composition. A peculiar interest attaches to these, which he sent to Queen Marjorie a month before his death.

To the May Queen of Whitelands, 1920.

Now is the month of May  
When all live things are gay;  
And hearts are no more sad.  
Come then with garlands green  
To dance about your Queen  
And teach us to be glad.  
Yet to the gladness comes  
The grief of darkened homes  
For brothers that were ours;  
To-day they cannot see  
The new leaf on the tree  
Or scent the lilac flowers.  
But hark brave words from France –  
“Dance, English maidens, dance!  
We died lest joy should cease”;  
Wherefore about your Queen  
Come foot it on the green.  
Let Love abound – and Peace!!

H.D. RAWNSLEY.”

Requiescant in pace.