

The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

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NEWSLETTER NUMBER ELEVEN

Welcome to the Summer 2005 edition of the Newsletter, which contains details of our September weekend: in search of Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Somerset*.

Special thanks go to Judith Bond, Eileen Johnson, Morine Krissdottir, Rosemary Sykes and Peter Tolhurst for their help in the making of this issue.

Judith Stinton

SUBSCRIPTIONS: a reminder

If you haven't yet paid for 2005, please send your subscription to Judith Bond, 26 Portway Close, Weymouth, Dorset DT4 8RF. UK members £10, overseas members \$20. Cheques should be made payable to the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society.

SPRING WEEKEND, APRIL 30-MAY 2, 2005

'It is a truth unilaterally acknowledged, that a deceased author in possession of a substantial readership, must be in want of a gift shop.'

Anon, *Price & Purchasibility*, 2005

I sometimes wonder what the shades of authors past would make of the learned articles, commercial memorabilia and literary societies that have sprung up in their wake. This year's Sylvia Townsend Warner Society AGM weekend set me pondering anew as we left Dorchester (in "Hardy Country") for a day trip to Hampshire.

We'd sorted out the car-shares the previous evening when we converged in a restaurant for vast helpings of lively conversation and an elegant sufficiency of food and drink. This is one of the friendliest of literary societies, which may be why, when we assembled in Chawton, we

decended on “Cassandra’s Cup” (a tearoom) before our visit to Jane Austen’s house. I have to admit that Jane Austen almost killed my enthusiasm for English literature: too many estates, too many silly girls, just too confusing. I still go pale remembering a test paper being returned to me bearing the legend “3/20. You’ve fielded to the wrong ball!” Still, that was the nadir of my school career and I soon discovered a helpful little pamphlet on Jane Austen in the school library. It was because of this pamphlet that we were in Chawton: for the author of the British Council booklet was Sylvia Townsend Warner.



Outside Jane Austen’s house. L to R: Stephen Mottram, Helen Sutherland, Rosemary Sykes, Jenny Wildblood, Judith Stinton, Annie Rhodes, Ann Torday Gulden and Judith Bond.

Sylvia mentions Jane’s time in Chawton, but what would either of them have made of its “heritagization”? Whilst “Cassandra’s Cup” is its silliest aspect, Austen’s house exhibits an uneasy tension between admiration (a lock of Jane’s hair), information (Jane’s writing table – surprisingly small – copies of documents, family history) and commemoration (one house manages to contain both a bookshop and a

gift shop: I resisted the Jane Austen fruit knife). Still, the commercialisation is the necessary underpinning of the information.

After lunch at the local pub (which, happily, is *not* called “Jane’s Jug”) we headed for another literary shrine: Gilbert White’s house at Selborne. When I had to study White’s *Natural History of Selborne* a friend told me about a wonderful little book she’d found in her university library, all about Gilbert White’s tortoise, Timothy. Quite how a geologist came to read this, I’m unsure, but, as with me and the British Council pamphlet, this was her first encounter with Sylvia Townsend Warner. If you haven’t read *Portrait of a Tortoise*, I urge you to, especially for the footnote that compares a discussion of Timothy’s hibernation haunts with the numerous places where Queen Victoria is said to have slept.

Gilbert White’s house has a breathtaking setting: the garden leads to a ha-ha, beyond which is a flowery meadow leading, in turn, to a steep, wooded slope. The house is much bigger than in White’s time. Confusingly, you may visit White’s study on the first floor whilst information boards tell you that the house was just a single storey when he lived there. Perhaps he worked in the attic? The remainder of the first floor now houses the Captain Oates Museum, because it was Oates’s cousin who purchased White’s house for the public, provided that the building would also commemorate his cousin. Had it not been such a hot day, I think we could have explored the grounds for hours but – exiting through the inevitable gift shop – we moved on to the coolness of the local church, replete with not one, but two Gilbert White memorial windows.

Then we took an unscheduled detour, to another church – All Saints, in the village of Steep – and another memorial window: one engraved by Laurence Whistler to commemorate the poet Edward Thomas. No Warner connection here, but I finally discovered souvenirs I wanted to buy: notecards of Thomas’s poems, illustrated by woodcuts.

From Steep we headed back to Warner country, where Eileen Johnson very kindly invited us to buffet supper at her home.

The final day of our get-together took us to terrain at once familiar and strange, as Dr Helen Sutherland explored Warner’s *Kingdoms of Elfin* whilst arguing with J.R.R. Tolkien’s views on constructions of

imaginary places. This lecture was wonderful: thoughtful, scholarly and entertaining. I look forward to being able to read it in the Society's journal.

After much discussion we made our way to Chaldon Herring to lay flowers on Sylvia's grave, to hear readings from her work, and to dine at the Sailor's Return. I look forward to returning again next year. In the meantime I shall revisit *Portrait of a Tortoise* and *Kingdoms of Elfin*, whilst wondering what the author of *A Museum of Cheats* would make of heritagized literary locales.

Rosemary Sykes

SEPTEMBER WEEKEND, 23TH – 25TH

For this autumn's outing, we have planned a visit to some of the Somerset places described in Sylvia Townsend Warner's guidebook on the county. (All quotations in the itinerary are from her book.)

Friday September 23rd

Meet at 7.30 for a meal in Dorchester. Venue to be arranged. Please contact Eileen Johnson by September 10th if you are coming, so that she can reserve a table.

Saturday September 24th

Trip to South Somerset, starting at Montacute, *'lying under its sharp hill-name [with] all the colours of a honey-comb'*. Park either in the National Trust car park or in the village square.

10 am. Meet for coffee in The Kings Arms Inn.

11 am. Explore the village. Montacute House is *'an Elizabethan House pur sang, built all of Ham stone'* with contemporary plasterwork, chimney-pieces and heraldic glass and a Long Gallery of wonderful Elizabethan and Jacobean portraits from the National Portrait Gallery. There are beautiful formal gardens and a landscaped park. The House is a National Trust property. For non-members, admission charges are: House £7.40, gardens £3.

The village itself is handsome and remarkably unspoilt. There are

Abbey ruins and a dovecot – and for those interested – the Powys family grave can be found in the churchyard. Their family home, Montacute Vicarage, is on the edge of the town. Lunch can be had at the Kings Arms (recommended by the Committee!) or at the Phelips Arms in the Square, or at the Museum Tearooms.

2pm. Meet in the car park. Drive over Ham Hill, viewpoint and source of the glorious golden stone. *'The quarrymen bicycling home at the end of their day go past like bumble-bees, gilded with a stone pollen.'*

Then on to Martock to see the church, described by Sylvia as *'an allegory of sacred and profane love'*. The glory of the church is its nave roof, angels and all, which dates from 1513. (For those National Trust members wishing to get their money's worth: the Treasurer's House is opposite.)

We then drive to Muchelney in the Somerset Levels, which has a Priest's House (National Trust) and a ruined Abbey – with a welcome adjoining tearoom in the Almonry. (Life was somewhat harder for the medieval monks: *'A bishop who inspected Muchelney Abbey in the 14th century reported that the monks were infringing their rule by making beds like tabernacles. An endless shiver of winter nights harps through the words.'*) Muchelney also has a feminist church, with a Tudor roof of rare female angels. John Leach's pottery workshop is in the village. Admission to the Abbey: £3. Concessions £2.30.

Finally, we visit two further churches – that at Langport, high on a hill above the town. The church is being restored, but it is the view from the churchyard that STW describes: *'as from the prow of a ship over sheets of water'*. This view is remarkably unchanged.

On then, to Huish Episcopi (look out en route for the remarkable Hanging Chapel). Huish has a sheer bright tower of Ham stone and blue lias. Sylvia called it *'the loveliest of all the doctrinal Somerset churches'*. Literally a high point on which to end the trip.

From 7pm. Eileen Johnson has kindly invited us to a buffet supper at her house in Dorchester. Again, she would like to know how many people are going to come!

Sunday September 25

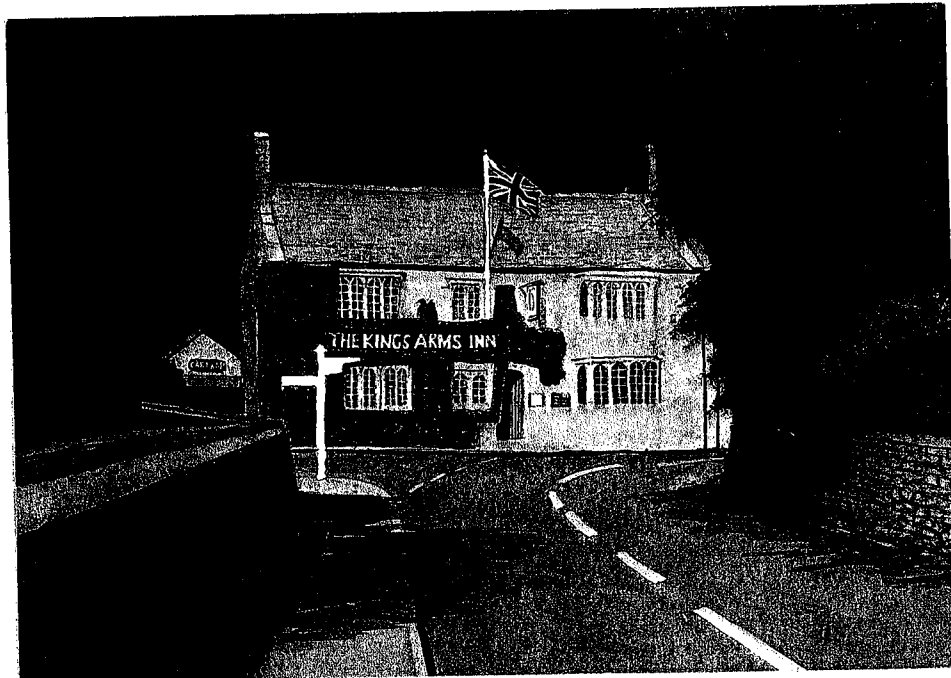
11 am. A visit to the house of Humphrey Stone, son of Reynolds, at Lower Lawn, West Tisbury, Wilts. Humphrey knew Sylvia and has some pieces of memorabilia, as well as examples of his father's work. From Dorchester, take the Blandford-Shaftesbury road and then either the A303 (simpler) or the A30.

12.30 Lunch in Tisbury.

Followed by (if there is time) a visit to Cadbury Castle, a Camelot claimant where 'on Christmas Eve King Arthur's knights ride two by two through the wood.' The best view of the camp, Sylvia writes, is from Sutton Montis churchyard. (She must have recalled this, too, while writing on T.H.White.)

3.30ish. Tea with Morine Krissdottir, curator of the STW room and biographer of John Cowper Powys. Morine lives at the Old Well House, Higher Odcombe, near Montacute – so we will have come full circle.

Please contact Eileen beforehand. During the weekend, if you want to join in at any point (or have lost the main party!) Stephen can be contacted by mobile. His number is: 07891282922.



PAUL NORDOFF: Pioneer in musical therapy

Paul Nordoff was an American composer of great versatility. In 1937 he wrote to Sylvia Townsend Warner, about the opera he had made from her novel *Mr Fortune's Maggot*. (Instead of reproaching him for doing this before seeking permission, Sylvia advised him on the copyright position.) So began a correspondence which continued until Nordoff's death in the early hours of January 18 1977. On January 19, Sylvia wrote in her diary: 'Sybil Bereford Peirce asked me to do an obituary bit about Paul for The Times. I was just going to bed, but I did it, wrenching my vitals; and had it finished by 1.30 a.m.' (As a result, the next day she was 'tired and cast down'.)

Here is the obituary, with thanks to Catharine Morris of the *Times*.

Paul Nordoff, the American composer and pioneer of music therapy for handicapped children, died in Germany on January 18. He was born in 1909 and was head of the Composition Department, Philadelphia Conservatory from 1937 to 1942, and Professor of Music at Bard College from 1949 to 1958. Among his compositions he was particularly well known for his songs. From 1961 to 1967 he was engaged in research in music therapy in the Department of Child Psychiatry, University of Pennsylvania. From 1966 onwards he travelled widely in Scandinavia, Germany, England, Australia, and New Zealand, lecturing and demonstrating his work in music therapy.

He held a unique position in the world of music therapy for handicapped children. Believing deeply in the inner life of each child and the uniqueness of every individual however disadvantaged, he concentrated his acute perception and musical creativity to the task of finding a means to motivate these children. His originality lay in the way he was able to use music, not only dynamically, but with clinical purpose and direction to open up new channels of communication and interaction between himself and the child. By awakening the inner emotional life he could lead the child into a shared musical experience, with possible changes in behaviour.

Paul Nordoff was a specially endowed and gifted person, and not least he was an inspired teacher. He could impart his ideas and share his enthusiasm and techniques with other musicians. His training courses and lectures all over the world demonstrated this. In England his work became known through the Nordoff Music Therapy Centre for handicapped children at Goldie Leigh Hospital in South London which he helped to establish in 1974. Here he inaugurated with his colleague Clive Robbins, the first full time training course for musicians in this particular approach. Only last week his work created so much interest that the BBC made a television film. There are also Norwegian and American films which record his work.

His insight, the depth of his vision and his integrity of purpose were the essence of his creative therapeutic approach.

Sylvia Townsend Warner

SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER'S SOMERSET

On December 1, 1946, Sylvia Townsend Warner wrote a letter to Paul Nordoff mentioning that she had received 'a commission to write a small book about Somerset. Just now I am in the midst of reading the many books about Somerset which have already been written. I am consoled for the numerousness by not finding one among them that I can enjoy. They all hurry like breathless Satans over the face of the earth, and never once do these breathless authors stop in a wood and smell the smell of the country. I hope I shall manage to do better.'

In the first chapter of her finished book she clearly states her intention. She is not writing a history of the county, but 'a book about Somerset; and though it cannot resemble a guide-book, since I am constitutionally incapable of resembling a guide, an err-and-stray-book would be nearer my measure.' Her approach is that of an

intellectual butterfly, lighting upon aspects of Somerset which attract her. Floods like snowfall in the Levels, Weston-super-Mare in winter 'when the sea has the beach to itself', the 'coal-measure country round Radstock and Midsomer Norton' are all made to sound as appealing as more visited spots like Cheddar Gorge (which she likens to Derbyshire) and Wells, 'the gentlest of our cathedrals'. Without the corset of a gazetteer, Warner is free to produce some brilliantly evocative writing.

The book is one of the 'Vision of England' series published by Paul Elek and edited by two of Sylvia's Communist friends from the Thirties: Clough and Amabel Williams-Ellis. The series is one of many begun after the Second World War, celebrating a Britain – and more particularly, an England - which had narrowly survived the great conflict. Ironically, much of what the books celebrated was soon to disappear – ploughing with horses, for instance, or working smithies or steam trains.

The direct predecessors – and contemporaries – of the Vision of England series were the Shell Guides, originally edited by John Betjeman, which began in 1934. No house style was imposed on the writers of these guides, who included Betjeman himself and the artists John Piper and Paul Nash (author of the Dorset guide). They, too, were quirkily selective. Christopher Hobhouse, in his Derbyshire guide, disregarded some of the great houses and larger churches in favour of the county's industrial landscapes: 'Everyone with an eye for form must love a railway cutting; the slick line of a slag heap is perhaps an acquired taste but there can be no question about the charm of the discreetly busy little quarries and mills...'

In her researches, Sylvia must have come across the *Shell Guide to Somerset*, recently described* as 'an indifferent performance by the Quennells, Peter and his father, on an elusive and disparate county'. This perhaps showed her the way. She could plainly better their performance, in a style of her own. And although there are passages where she seems to be straining for effect (the uneasy and hectic first page, for instance) the book is ultimately very successful. It makes the reader want to visit the places described.

Now the Vision of England series has vanished; and *Somerset* itself is quite difficult to obtain. It is seldom mentioned in assessments of Warner's work, yet the sections on monastic life (see Muchelney above) and perhaps the passages on King Arthur and Camelot (see South Cadbury) have echoes in her fiction which might be worth exploring. And the book itself is still well worth reading.

**Stylistic Cold Wars* by Timothy Mowl, Murray 2000.

Judith Stinton

POINTS OF VIEW

One of Sylvia's many other correspondents was Walter Strachan, schoolmaster, poet and translator. Some of her letters to Strachan were published in *The Living Curve, Letters to W.J.Strachan 1929-1979* (Taranman/Carcanet, 1984). An expanded version of the book has been recently published, including letters up to 1994. In a review of this new edition in the *Guardian* of April 23 2005, Nicholas Clee makes short work of Sylvia's contributions to the book, referring to 'Sylvia Townsend Warner, whose correspondence on such subjects as the Third Programme and the etymology of the word "aftermath" might, with its whiff of genteel stuffiness, have come from *The Lyttelton/Hart-Davis Letters*'.

The relevant extracts are printed below. Of what is now Radio 3, her observation still holds. The second extract is one professional translator talking precisely to another. Like any writer, Sylvia had her weaknesses, but 'stuffy' she was not.

Frome Vauchurch, 29.xi.1946

'But I'm enjoying the third programme, aren't you? Did you hear the announcer, t'other night, remark, 'We are now running twenty minutes late,' as calmly as if we were in a train to Cork or Cadiz? That is what I reckon to be civilisation. Of course I like a lot of the things they do (and did you hear the old Boulanger singing and banging the airs from Oedipus Rex, and the ravishing serene singing of her choir?) - but best of all do I like the way they do it.'

1.vi.1947

'*Aftermath*. My quarrel with it is not that it is too vague, but not vague enough. My solidly literal mind says that aftermath implies some sort of harvesting process (I think it is the second hay-crop, actually?) and that the rest of your poem implies catastrophe or cataclysm or some variety of cata rather than anything like a harvest. Words are the devil. It would be much pleasanter to use notes...

Only Connect...Poets, Painters, Sculptors: Friendships and Shared Passions 1924-94, by Walter Strachan is published by Jon Carpenter at £30.

The Dickensian

The Dickens Fellowship was founded in 1902 and three years later started its own magazine, *The Dickensian*. In the early days, there were no English literary academics, but there were Dickens scholars, who provided the magazine's pages with a great many facts.

By the 1950s, however, Dickens was well-established in the school curriculum, and the magazine became an outlet for university scholars.

Now, *The Dickensian* reflects all aspects of Dickens' culture, from musicals to freshly discovered letters - as a current exhibition shows. But not only will this exhibition display examples of its own pages, but also those of some 'friends and competitors' including the STW Society. There will be a 'browsing station' where visitors can look at

examples of modern literary magazines. We hope that this link will bring us some new members.

The exhibition runs until 31 October at The Charles Dickens Museum, 48 Doughty Street, London WC1N 2LX. 0207 405 2127.
Open Mon-Sat 10.00 – 16.30, Sun 11.00 to 1630.
Admission £5 (and concessions)

Concerning authors' Cottages, No 9
(Miss Green's Cottage, Chaldon Herring)

'I have a country cottage,' may mean the possession of anything from a bungalow to a small manor house, from a semi-detached villa to a reed-thatched, old-oaked architect's fancy, plumbed within and half-timbered without. My cottage has four rooms, and would let, unfurnished, at the usual local rental of 2s. to 2s. 6d a week. It is neither picturesque nor convenient. But it is freehold, and stands in a small garden, and its price was £90 only.

When I bought it its water-supply consisted of a water-butt and an understanding that the tenant might fetch water from a well farther up the road. Fortunately, its back kitchen, being a lean-to, had a roof sufficiently lofty to allow of a small tank being fitted indoors, collecting the rainwater off the slate roof.

To this I added a small sink, draining into a sump in the garden; and while heaven permits (and in this convenient climate heaven generally does) this allows me a water supply for kitchen purposes. Only those who have had to carry water into the house and out again can appreciate the beatitude of a tap and a run-away.

I have, when I choose, constant hot water also, for the lofty back kitchen has a copper in it. There is a general idea that a copper is useful only on washing day or for boiling Christmas puddings. This is a great mistake. A copper is most valuable in solving two great problems of village living: how to have enough hot water, and how to dispose of rubbish. To work well, it must be kindled like a fire; with sticks, cinders and enough coal to raise the water almost to boiling point. After this, and fifteen to twenty minutes should be long enough, it can be fed with the surprising quantity of papery rubbish which accumulates in any present-day household; and with a little more attention, and a few handfuls of cinders, the water will remain hot all day. A copper will burn almost anything, it will even calcine tins; but it is a waste to feed it with vegetable rubbish, which can be rendered into garden manure.

Like most village people I cook on oil, with a twelve-gallon oil-drum replenished by the monthly van. As the copper is one mainstay, the stock-pot is another. With a stock-pot I can snap my fingers at tinned soups and meat extracts. At its richest, it gives me a consommee; at its most exhausted, the basis of a mulligatawny. And in its way it is as useful as the copper at engulfing fragments. But, people say, a stock-pot, unless constantly reboiled, is apt to go sour. It will, if, when taken from the fire, the lid is left on and the steam allowed to drip back; it may, if vegetables are put with the bones and meat trimmings. But it is not necessary to add vegetables; a bouquet of herbs will give it an aroma, and if vegetable stock be needed, it is far better made of vegetables alone.

After buying her stock-pot (and let it be of stout aluminium, not the traditional iron tank so unwieldy and slow to boil) the cottage cook will be well advised to stock a herb-bed, the nearer the kitchen door the better. It should contain at least a dozen herbs: sage, green and purple, mint, marjoram, tansy, chives, parsley, thyme, common and lemon-scented, tarragon, hyssop, basil, savory, southernwood, rosemary and balm. Nasturtium leaves and seeds are admirable in their season, fennel is liked by many, and there may be a use for rue, though I must say I have not found it. Having grown these herbs, and they will all grow as obligingly as weeds, she must study their flavours, learn to compound them, and learn, above all, not to use to many of them at

once. Such combinations as chives and nasturtiums, tansy and balm, thyme and southernwood, are as exquisite as the usual mess of mixed herbs is dreary.

From the kitchen door it should be easy to keep an eye on the garden to avoid that wasteful tragedy, the too-well-matured vegetable. A broad bean kept until its green jerkin has turned to a fawn spongebag is a broad bean misunderstood. Bullet-like peas, long, tough, hairy runner beans, harvest-festival marrows – those who live in towns or placate a gardener must put up with these; but the cottage cook, if she grows her own vegetables, need not submit to such odious longevities. She must pounce on the innocents; nature will always see to it that there are enough sexagenarians.

Sylvia Townsend Warner

A flavourful lesson in cottage economy! Waste is kept to a minimum, and almost everything is recycled. This article comes from *The Countryman*, and was collected in *The Countryman Book*, Odhams, 1948.

INFORMATION, PLEASE!

Society member Susan Bell is looking for information on Sylvia Townsend Warner's music, about which little has been written.

Susan refers to a letter dated October 1919 [on display in the Writers' Gallery in the Dorset County Museum] from Sylvia Townsend Warner to Thomas Hardy at Max Gate, seeking permission to set three of his poems to music. The poems are 'The Pine Planters', 'She at his Funeral' and 'The Subalterns'. There is no reply included in Millgate's edition of Hardy's collected letters, but there is a draft reply written in Hardy's hand on the bottom of the letter, giving her full permission to use the poems.

Did Sylvia ever follow this up?

If you have any information on this or other music-related matters, please contact Susan Bell:
Hackell90@hotmail.com

A LAST WORD

In Chapter IV of *Somerset*, Sylvia quotes intriguingly from the poetry of T.E. Brown, adding that it was by then 'the dark side of the moon for Brown's reputation. He is, I'm afraid, a very mongrelly poet...' But who was T.E. Brown? He has now gone from the dark side to total lunar eclipse.

Information came from a little blue book, *Poems of T.E. Brown*, published by Macmillan in 1922. Brown, the son of a minister, was born in 1830 at Douglas, Isle of Man where he died in 1897. His 'outer life was singularly free of incidents'. He studied classics at Oxford and became a Fellow of Oriel, returning to the island to teach at his old school. In 1857 he married his cousin, Miss Stowell. After three unhappy years teaching at Gloucester (thereafter referred to as 'the Gloucester incident') he became a schoolmaster at Clifton College, Bristol. He spent twenty-eight years teaching at Clifton and longed to be there after he left.

So far, so dull. If Brown had been a character out of one of Sylvia's novels (and for a while I thought she might have invented him), he would have ended up as a wizard, or a magician, alarming the islanders, running wild with a troupe of tailless cats... But he was real, and she was right: Brown is a very *mixed* poet, often – even within one piece of writing. The poem from which she quotes the second stanza is called 'The Bristol Channel'. Here it is, in its entirety.

*The sulky old gray brute!
But when the sunset strokes him,
Or twilight shadows coax him,
He gets so silver-milky,
He turns so soft and silky,
He'd make a water-spaniel for King Knut.*

*This sea was Lazarus, all day
At Dives' gate he lay,
And lapped the crumbs.
Night comes;
The beggar dies –
Forthwith the Channel, coast to coast,
Is Abraham's bosom; and the beggar lies
A lovely ghost.*

Judith Stinton