

The Aylesford Press

David Ashton

Anne Williamson has very kindly asked me to write a few words about The Aylesford Press and I am very pleased to do so. It is often hard to be specific as to the exact moment in one's life when an idea was conceived, and this is the case with me as regards our publishing venture The Aylesford Press.

I have always loved books, whether to read or to possess, and an early interest in printing (one of my best Christmas presents, as a child, was a John Bull printing outfit!) developed over the years to include typography and book design. I have also always been something of a collector, and although lack of means imposed a severe limitation, in due course I found myself collecting, in a very modest way, limited edition and private press books.

All this started to come together when I met, at the Aylesford Review Literary Weekends still held each year at Spode House, near Rugeley, Staffs, Father Brocard Sewell. I arrived at this situation as a first stage via Aylesford Priory, which I and my family first visited by motor car as twentieth century pilgrims, secondly via *The Aylesford Review*, the literary quarterly which Father Sewell edited from 1955 to 1968, changing it from being the priory's 'parish' magazine to a literary periodical of national repute, and thirdly by my fortuitous decision to 'follow up' an advertisement in that journal for the Spode House literary weekend.

I cannot remember whether Henry was at Spode House over the first of the Weekends that I attended, but he was there for two if not three years after I started to make the Aylesford Review Weekends an annual occasion.

The adjectives and phrases that I would summon to outline my memories of Henry are charming; humorous; a touch mischievous; somewhat unpredictable; if encouraged, the life of the party; and having an extremely strong inner integrity. I, of course, was the newcomer to the group, and it took me some time to 'work my passage'. I recognized Henry as having great personal force, and as well as being polite (in the Victorian sense of the word), I was consequently wary. But, pursuing my book-collecting hobby, I asked him to sign my copy of the St. Albert's Press limited edition of Francis Thompson's *The Mistress of Vision*, to which he had contributed the essay 'A First Adventure with Francis Thompson'. He did this without demur, dating his autograph 'Spode. May 1970'. This is one of the most treasured books. I did not then realise, as I have since heard, that Henry was not always kind to autograph hunters. He acceded to my request quickly and decisively. In regard to *The Mistress of Vision*, it is interesting that only recently, 20 years after publication, a number of uncirculated copies, long since almost forgotten, should have come to light.

As for Henry's darker side, at Spode House there was no evidence of this. Henry was happy at Spode House, as I believe he also was at Aylesford Priory. I particularly remember (it may have been 1970) being mightily entertained, as part of the weekend's proceedings, by the reading of Thomas Shadwell's 'The Sullen Lovers', with Henry and Frances Horovitz in the cast. I cannot visit Spode without expecting to hear, as it were from the next room or the other side of a conversational group, Henry's voice, or to meet him walking one of the dim corridors, or to see his striding silhouette on the upland track above the house.

The Aylesford Review finally ceased in 1968. The last book published by Father Sewell's St. Albert's Press was his own biography of *Cecil Chesterton* in 1975. The Aylesford Review Weekends have survived, but ever more precariously, with next year's likely to be the last.

But it was in the course of informal discussions over several years' meetings at Spode that the idea was born to in some way carry on the tradition of *The Aylesford Review* and St. Albert's Press.

In regard to the books that we hope to produce, our policy is that, with few if any exceptions, they will be published in small numbered limited editions, type-set in hot metal to the highest standards, carefully designed and printed on good and sometimes special paper, and lovingly bound. In regard to subjects, the easiest way for me to cover this point is by drawing attention to the fact that Father Sewell is our principal editorial adviser. A list of his literary achievements, as a writer, an editor, a compiler, a promoter and encourager, and as a catalyst, would show the diversity of his erudition and knowledge.

How The Aylesford Press will develop cannot be known to any of us. The books are designed to be collectable, and I foresee that there will be some people who will want to collect one of each of our publications irrespective of the subject. One can learn only at the cost of making mistakes, and it soon became clear to us that the de luxe edition of *A Glimpse of the Ancient Sunlight* should have been twice as large. The edition sold out within three days (pleasant but frustrating!) and one bookseller specialising in private press books told us that he would have taken all 50 copies, as an investment. I am very proud that we were able to start with a volume on Henry Williamson.

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Books available from The Aylesford Press include several past titles by Fr. Brocard Sewell, especially *Henry Williamson*; *The Man, The Writings*, and most importantly, a certain number of copies of *The Mistress of Vision*, which includes Henry's 14-page essay 'A First Adventure with Francis Thompson'. New titles are; *A Glimpse of the Ancient Sunlight*, Sue Caron, £6.00; *Frances Horovitz: Poet* ed. by Fr. Brocard Sewell, £6.90 (De Luxe £45); *Aylesford Poets*; 3—*Sylvia Bruce*, £3.90. For full list write to: The Aylesford Press, 158 Moreton Road, Upton, Wirral, Cheshire L49 4NZ.

IMPORTANT MESSAGE from the Editor

Among the material submitted recently have been two or three items particularly concerning the First World War. My editorial assistants have pointed out to me that it would be appropriate to use the next Issue, No. 18 Autumn 1988, to mark the 70th Anniversary of the Great War, and so I have held back those items for that purpose, and hereby invite further contributions on that subject.

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