

Willie Maddison's Epitaph for Mary Ogilvie

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Readers of *The Pathway* know that in Chapter 8, Willie Maddison says to Mary Ogilvie, "Mary, I want to quote you your epitaph. It is in Rookhurst Church, on one of the flagstones, and is partly in brass and partly in stone, to the memory of William Maddison, who died in 1680. There are two inscriptions, one in English, the other in Latin. It's the English one I love – it just fits you. Shall I say it?"

Although quoting a girl he loves her epitaph may seem hardly the most tactful approach, when Mary acquiesces Willie Recites:

*Silence (deare shado) will best thy grave become
And grief that is not only deep but dumbe,
For who'll beleive our vocall teares, but see
The very tongues themselves, here dead in thee.
Twelve wellspun lustres sent thee speechless hence
Twice child in age, always in innocence,
To smooth thy Entrance, where true blisse doth raigne
Nature and Grace would have thee born again.*

This is in any case somewhat inappropriate for a girl; not only was it, according to Willie, a memorial to a man, but the man was not young. A lustre was a period of five years (a handy term that might well be revived): William Maddison of Rookhurst (or whoever the actual person commemorated may have been) had therefore died at the age of 60. The phrase 'twice child in age' is therefore puzzling. Was the dead man perhaps a gentle simpleton who lacked the power of speech even in life?

I have often wondered where, in fact, Henry found this epitaph. There seems no doubt that it was genuine; whatever his skills as a writer, would he have been capable of a convincing pastiche of 17th century verse?

It has been said that it is in Exeter Cathedral, on a tablet decorated with sheaves of wheat. I have searched, but unless I am very unobservant, it is not there. Coming on a marble memorial on the south aisle wall, I hoped for a moment that I had found it. In low relief is depicted an urn on a plinth, against which a cherub leans in mourning, overhung by what might be a corn sheaf, but which looks more like a stylized weeping willow, or even laurel. The inscription begins:

*Farewell, dear shade – but let the marble tell
what heavenly worth in youth and beauty fell,
With every virtue blest, whate'er thy lot
To charm a court, or dignify a cot.
In each relation shone thy varied life
Of daughter, sister, mother, friend and wife.*

There are more verses in the same strain. The lamented lady was Laura, wife of George Ferdinand, Lord Southampton; she died at Dawlish in 1798. No 'Silence (deare shado)', there.

An early 17th century poem, 'Tears at the grave of Sir Albertus Morton (who was buried at Southampton) wept by Sir H. Wotton' begins 'Silence, in truth, would speak my sorrow best', and resembles 'Silence (deare shado)' in metre, language, spelling and tone. However, its seven verses do not include those quoted by Willie Maddison (and Morton, in any case, died at the age of 41 in 1625).

Whether it appears on a memorial tablet or in a book of verse, the *Pathway* epitaph remains, as far as I know, a teasing mystery. Or does a member of the Henry Williamson Society know its source?