

A Poet's Death: Richard Middleton

By Stephen Wayne Foster

"...a woodland rivulet, a poet's death." —John Keats

There is a myth about how Romantic poets are supposed to live: they are to have unhappy childhoods, to be misunderstood, to have unlucky love affairs, to write poems which the critics fail to appreciate, to starve in a garret, and at last to die young. In the case of Richard Barham Middleton, the myth became a reality.

Middleton was born to middle-class parents in a London suburb on October 28, 1882. He was a very sensitive boy, acutely pained by the ordinary dullness and ugliness of life, and his childhood was accordingly unhappy, reflected in two autobiographical stories, 'A Drama of Youth' and 'The New Boy.' He became a clerk in an office in London in 1901, by which time he had grown a beard and moustache, dressing in a business suit with vest, not in the Bohemian manner we might expect of poets. However, in 1905 he joined a literary club, the New Bohemians, spending all day at the office and all evening at the club, drinking and chumming with Henry Savage and several other literary figures. Savage was Arthur Machen's agent, and Middleton became acquainted with Machen, Frank Harris and Lord Alfred Douglas. Harris and Douglas were editors of journals, and Middleton found outlets for the poems, stories and essays he had begun to write. In 1907, Middleton resigned from his office job and attempted to support himself by journalism. In 1906, he had moved away from his parents and into apartments in Blackfriars Road. In the company of Harris and Savage, he roamed the streets and parks of London in search of adolescent girls, but he appears only to have related to them with idealized sentiment. He wrote poems about a young prostitute named Irene, and he fell in love with two girls named Lily (or Lilian) and Christine. They were interested in other young men, and the love was all on Middleton's side. It was all very like Dowson and his adolescent love for Adelaide, but it produced some of the finest love poetry in the language.

Failing to make a living wage from journalism, Middleton went to Belgium, where he moved into cheap lodgings at 10, Rue de Joncker, in a suburb of Brussels, Saint-Gilles. He roamed around Belgium and came back to live briefly with his parents, but he soon returned to the Rue de Joncker where he committed suicide on December 1, 1911.

Seventy years later, a Belgian scholar named Alfons Elsen, at this writer's behest, attempted to research Middleton. He went to the Rue de Joncker, and found the apartment buildings still standing as they had been in Middleton's time. The present residents are "mostly

immigrants.... The quarter of the city is rather fallen into decay." Elsen then went to the cemetery of the Rue de Calevoet, the Cimetiere de St. Gilles in the suburb of Uccle, where Middleton had been buried. It is customary for the graves to be replaced after thirty years unless the authorities are bribed by relatives of the deceased, so Middleton's grave is no longer marked. Elsen contacted the two leading newspapers, which responded that there was no mention of Middleton's suicide in their archives. The cemetery had been in a rural area at the time, but now it has been urbanized, and the memory of Middleton in Brussels has been lost in the changes of the years as if he had never been there. In part, Middleton's death certificate (in Elsen's translation from the French) reads thus:

"No. 618 of the fourth day of the month December, year 1911, at ten a.m. Act of Decease of Richard Barham Middleton, author, aged twenty-nine years and ten days, born in London, England, residing there at Lambton Road no. 45, deceased in this municipality, Rue de Joncker no. 10, the 2nd of this month at four p.m. [the time his corpse was discovered], celibate son of Thomas Middleton, engineer, aged 61 years, and of his wife Isabelle Anne Keating, without profession, aged 58 years, both residing at London."

Elsen also sent a map of Brussels and photographs of the Rue de Joncker, and we wish to express our gratitude to him here for his kind assistance. Other assistance was forthcoming from Brian Butler of Devonshire, C. Alan Soons of Buffalo, and Timothy d'Arch Smith of London. However, in our attempt to write a full-length biography of Middleton, we failed to locate any manuscripts of Middleton's works or letters.

All of our knowledge of Middleton, with a few exceptions, comes from one source, Henry Savage, of whom also little is known, and whose literary remains are more elusive than Middleton's. Savage single-handedly rescued Middleton from oblivion, for none of Middleton's writings had appeared in book form by the time of his death. Savage arranged for a collected edition in five uniform volumes, published in London by T. Fisher Unwin in 1912-13, and in New York by Mitchell Kennerley in 1913-14. These were *The Ghost Ship and Other Stories* (1912), *Poems and Songs* (1912), *Poems and Songs: second series* (1912), *The Day Before Yesterday* (1912), and *Monologues* (1913). These were followed later by *The District Visitor* (1924), *Richard Middleton's Letters to Henry Savage* (1929) and *The Pantomime Man* (1933). Savage wrote the only biogra-

phy, *Richard Middleton: the Man and His Work* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1922), which rescued most of the information that has come down to us. The *Letters to Savage* are the only volume still available in America, but only in an expensive library reprint. *The Ghost Ship* was reprinted by Victor Gollancz in 1964, but Middleton's books are now out of print in his native land. Savage's biography is still in print, and fortunately much of Middleton's poetry is quoted therein. Some of Middleton's short stories are occasionally reprinted in anthologies, especially 'The Ghost Ship,' which was adapted into a Spanish version by the Cuban Oscar Hurtado (born 1932) in his book, *Carta de un Juez* (Havana, 1955). Savage admitted that he had failed to include some of Middleton's minor poems and other writings in the collected edition, but it is now impossible to locate these missing items. So small is the knowledge of Middleton beyond what Savage and Frank Harris had to say about him that I shall quote the following dedication written in a copy of *Monologues*, addressed from Middleton's parents' house at 45 Lambton Road, Wimbledon:

"Dear Garland,

Miss Middleton and I are agreed upon sending you a copy of the books. I hesitate to put anything on the title page though I feel somehow that in your case and mine the author would forgive me.

Yours, Henry Savage."

Middleton's better fiction was collected as *The Ghost Ship and Other Stories*, praised by Arthur Machen as "very fine indeed." The title story is usually considered his masterpiece, reprinted more often than any of his other work. It is a humorous fantasy about a ghostly visit to an English village. The volume also has the two autobiographical stories or sketches mentioned above, and seventeen other tales, most of them either excellent Edwardian ghost stories (e.g., "The Conjuror"), or tales of sensitive and poetic boys modelled, of course, on their author. There is also the exquisite fairy tale, "The Poet's Allegory," worthy of the pen of Oscar Wilde, but intended as an attack on a certain realistic novelist, whose name was wisely removed from the last sentence of the story by Savage! Writing in *Horror Literature*, ed. Marshall Tymn (1981), Jack Sullivan calls some of his tales "grisly and frightening" and terms Middleton "one of the most interesting stylists in British ghostly fiction... rich and exuberant in his more traditional ghost stories (especially the humorous ones), lean and concise in his more original psychological tales" (p. 258).

The Day Before Yesterday is a collection of essays and sketches about children and childhood, Middleton's favorite subject, for he was one of those men (others being Kenneth Grahame, James Barrie and Forrest Reid) who were Edwardian Peter-Pantheists, refusing to become "mature" adults, and retaining a nostalgia for what Grahame called "the Golden Age." (Middleton's last friend was a very young girl in Brussels, who may yet be alive, although Elsen did not meet anyone

who remembered Middleton.) His poems and stories are full of boys and girls. *Monologues* is a collection of Middleton's journalistic essays, of lesser merit, but vital for an understanding of the man. *The Pantomime Man* and *The District Visitor* are exceedingly rare. The former is John Gawsworth's collection of Middleton's tales, and *Visitor* was a one-act play, performed in 1915, a satire on Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird*. The Gawsworth collection contains a superb appreciative introduction from his greatest latter day enthusiast.¹

The two volumes of *Poems and Songs* contain the best of Middleton's poetry. A few other poems were quoted in the biography without being included in the two volumes. Middleton was a traditional Edwardian Romantic; and had he lived, would have been in the company of Walter de la Mare and the other traditional poets who have been downgraded by critics of "modern" poetry. Middleton, like James Elroy Flecker, Rupert Brooke and several others, was an Edwardian poet who died just as traditional poetry was about to be assaulted by the Modernists, Realists and Socialists. Middleton belongs to the Romantic tradition of Keats, Swinburne, Dowson and a host of minor poets who sometimes wrote in an elevated style with Elizabethan diction (thy, thou, hast) and a "prettified" choice of words and images. Middleton's poems repeat over and over the same things: dreams, moon, roses, stars, love, night, song, skies, death, silver, crimson, "fair" (for "beautiful"), and so forth. He uses Greek mythology (Hylas, Narcissus) and English folklore, and there are a few historical poems of Drake fighting the Spaniards; but above all there is love, ideal love for adolescent girls, and the shadow of Death brooding over all, like in Dowson's or Housman's lyrics.

Middleton had a sure command of the lyrical form, and his finest poems are an exquisite experience, like listening to Rimsky-Korsakov and a nightingale together by moonlight in a forest. There is nothing quite like them, even if some of them could have been written by Flecker or some other Edwardian or Georgian. But there is no substitute for the poems themselves, so let us begin with a few fragments by way of an overture:

"The Last Cruise"

I saw the lights of a ship march slowly over the sea,
And the land fell away behind me, and into the night
That covereth all things and passeth no more for me,
My heart went dreaming.

"Irene"

Oh, lovely days long dead! There falls on me
In this dim world I may not understand
An echo of your sweetness; in my hand
One frail, sad rose inspires eternity
With dreams that are no more, and from the sea
That beats upon this grey perplexed land,
Blows rumour of some merry drunken band
That keeps your revels still in Arcady.

And now let us have several poems in their entirety:

"At the Gates"

How long, how long, oh, night?
The delicate fabric of the stars is frayed
Where dawn lets in the light;
And, in the scented glade,
The thrushes thread day's lattices, and sing
The end of your impassioned sorrowing.

I see your glittering tears
Scattered upon the lawn's awaking green;
The bitter knowledge of the bitter years
Since ever love has been,
Lies in your deep, kind breast, and with the day
You mourn poor human love, that dies away.

How long, how long, oh, night?
Across your hours
I have fulfilled the task of my delight,
I have won rapturous lethargy of flowers;
But day unfolds, and I shall keep my song
How long, oh, night, oh, wanton love, how long?

"On a Dead Youth"

The boy dreams...
Lays down before his God a rosebud's worth,
And far above the shrine a planet gleams;
No more of earth!
And at his side the maidens may not weep,
Lest it should break his sleep.

All his spring flowers beneath their feet lie dead,
Dear boy, and love was never a word he used,
Though for their faces all his tears were shed
And all his roses bruised;
Better it was, ere shame were kissed awake
To perish for their sake.

And with soft fingers they shall pity death
And close his lovely eyes,
And they shall warm his body with their breath,
Stir heaven with their sighs;
For life shall give them other lips to kiss,
But none so sweet as this.

And then with mournful wonder they shall go,
Love's wings are furled,
And well they know that they shall never know
The meaning of the world,
But some dim thing within their bosom cries,
And Adonais dies.

The boy dreams...
Why should we weep for him who wakes no more?
The kisses shall not burn for him, it seems,
The frail heart's core;
Though on the hills the lonely maidens call,
Love, to his festival.

The next poem, "inspired by a picture postcard,"
was praised by Frank Harris as "finer than Herrick,

nearly as beautiful, indeed, as 'The Grecian Urn'." It might be mentioned at this point that Harris, in his *Life and Loves*, claims that he and Middleton were wont to roam together through darkest Wimbledon in search of young shop girls, a view far removed from Savage's pious portrait. Was Harris a liar here (he often *was*) or was Savage a whitewasher? Perhaps both men distorted the picture.

"The Bathing Boy"

I saw him standing idly on the brim
Of the quick river, in his beauty clad,
So fair he was that Nature looked at him
And touched him with her sunbeams here and there,
So that his cool flesh sparkled, and his hair
Blazed like a crown above the naked lad.

And so I wept; I have seen lovely things,
Maidens and stars and roses all a-nod
In moonlit seas, but Love without his wings
Set in the azure of an August sky,
Was all too fair for my mortality,
And so I wept to see the little god.

Till with a sudden grace of silver skin
And golden lock he dived, his song of joy
Broke with the bubbles as he bore them in;
And lo, the fear of night was on that place,
Till decked with new-found gems and flushed of face,
He rose again, a laughing, choking boy.

Before proceeding to Middleton's two finest poems, which are serious in tone, it would be best to quote here one of his few lighter poems, from the biography, which was included in a letter written to Savage in 1906, just after Middleton had moved into Blackfriars Road:

My name is Richard Middleton, I'm living at Blackfriars,
Two stories up, above the street, to chasten my desires;
I have no purple heather here, no field, nor living tree—
But every night when I look out God lights the stars for
me.

My name is Richard Middleton and once upon a day
I read a story in a book and once I learned to pray,
And once I learnt to sing a song to charm the weary
whiles—
And now I read and pray and sing, and God looks down
and smiles.

For we are happy people here, a-living in Blackfriars;
St. Paul's lies through the window-panes and half a
hundred spires;
And all the world goes laughing by, and we have found
it true
That everywhere above the grey brave eyes may see the
blue.

I am not rich nor hope to be, but mine are day and night,
And all the world to look upon, and laughter, and the
light,

Where I can set my torch ablaze to make the beacon
burn,
And show to God that in Blackfriars, two stories up,
I yearn.

And God looks down from heaven and he sees my
beacon fires,
And says, "That's Richard Middleton a-living in
Blackfriars."
He does not grant me roses here, nor sunny fields nor
tree,
But every night when I look out he lights the stars
for me.

Now we come to the two masterpieces:

"The Last Serenade"

Courage, my song, and like a lover climb
To her high balcony; this is the night
When in a star-lit valley where old Time
Pauses to latch his way-worn shoe, delight
Shall blossom like a flower; though she rest
Within her highest turret, this my song
Shall bring her down to my insurgent breast
Where the blood burns that has been cool too long.

Be silent now, oh, moon, and be you dumb,
Oh too importunate stars! I will not hear
Your dulcet tales that make my senses numb
With easeless longing, for the hour is near
When I will go, who with my love abide,
Dreaming across your luminous seas no more
To the far gates of heaven, where the tide
Flings wrack of worlds upon the reverberate shore.

Nay, though my eyes grieve for the way we went,
Peace shall attend my heart and love shall steep
My passionate soul in waters of content;
No more enamoured of my lady Sleep
I shall explore in tranquil wakefulness
My love's own universe; her little hands,
Her eyes, her lips, are all my loveliness,
And these are all my heritable lands.

This is the end of all things, thou shalt cease,
Oh heart, thy timeless journey followed far,
For all thy days shall be inviolate peace
And all thy starry nights shall know one star
Irradiant and serene; and thou, oh mind,
Weary of thy long questionings, shalt prove
Servant of my enchanted life and find
In all thy ways the wisdom that is love.

The world is drunk with night, there gather slow
From some remoter heaven to tempt my blood
The mutable stars processional, and lo!
On all the hills the moonlight is in flood;
But I am wakeful yet. Oh song, ascend
Swift to her ears and bid her dreams depart.
To-night the sombre years shall have an end,
To-night, to-night shall bring her to my heart!

The next poem, another masterpiece, gives the reader
the impression that Lilian is dead. Actually, she out-
lived Middleton.

"Lament for Lilian"

I bow my head before the hands of Fate
And dream no more and reap no more of song.
I have denied my destiny too long,
I have achieved my punishment too late;
For I, in vanished, unforgotten hours,
Such little hands, such shining eyes, have known,
That, lacking these, I may not sing alone
In this sad place of salt and withered flowers.

And this is life—and these, dear God, are men,
These pale, thin shades! Long since by my dream's grace
The dawn wind blew her hair across her face,
And there was rapture in the morning then.
Her eyes shone darkly in the silken net
Flung slantwise o'er her face, her glad lips said,
"You will remember Lily when she's dead."
And this is life—would God I might forget!

Beneath her feet the green earth rolled away
From sea to sea, and I might understand
The water's song, the music of the land,
The lingering choruses of night and day,
That gave me, with a dole of childish tears,
The knowledge of my blood's supreme delight:
The yearning of the morning for the night,
The timeless passion of the hemispheres.

My love was more than any life of mine
And more than me, before its sudden gleam
The years that knew me faded like a dream,
I was as one who drinks enchanted wine
To sport with gods; and yet there shone for me
Across my madness, Lily, laughingwise,
A human blossom glad for human eyes,
Made pagan by a child's serenity.

Ah! Lord of Love, these are my eyes that weep,
These are my lips that do lament her so,
Mourning the little feet that long ago
Made echoes, echoes, in the halls of sleep,
With such delight of dance as children keep
When spring has strewed the daisy-fields with snow,
To such soft music as the children know
Greeting the spring, upon the hills a-peep.

If she were dead, surely in dreamy ways
Her tender spirit would delight me still,
With gifts of lilies, tall and fair, and fill
With silver blossoms my unhappy days.
And through the meadows where the moon a-stir
Binds the wet flowers in garlands with her beams
To deck the brows of sleep, across my dreams,
Down to the morning I would follow her.

For I am lord of all fair things that Death
Has fashioned into dreams, and all his art
Would only bring more surely to my heart

My wondrous Lily, sweet with flowers' breath,
Who now, in alien palaces, enchants
Youth, with her laughing lips and shining eyes,
And treads no more beneath the summer skies
The somber forests that Apollo haunts.

Song is no tribute to a singing girl,
For whom the wanton earth makes madrigals,
To whom each wistful star at twilight calls
In tuneful numbers from the heavenly whirl;
So here's an end, I ask forgetfulness
Now that my little store of hours is spent,
And heart to laugh upon my punishment—
Dear God, what means a poet more or less?

If this is not worthy to stand beside the odes of Keats,
what is? When Richard Barham Middleton, *homme de lettres* (as the death certificate calls him) put the chloroform to work in a Brussels garret seventy years ago, the world lost one of its greatest poets.

Notes

- 1 Lyric poet, editor and bookman John Gawsworth (1912-1970) idolized Middleton—one of whose unpublished poems was read on the Gawsworth B.B.C. television tribute in 1970. Gawsworth attended Middleton's old school, Merchant Taylor's, was born a few months after Middleton's suicide (reincarnation?) and led a similarly tragic life. He repeatedly anthologized Middleton's prose and verse, as well as editing collections of each. Gawsworth, even more than Middleton, is forgotten and out of print today. (-ed.)

