

# Colby



Colby Quarterly

---

Volume 4  
Issue 2 *May*

Article 4

---

May 1955

## An Angelic Anarchist

Oliver St. John Gogarty

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 4, no.2, May 1955, p.24-28

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

## 24 Colby Library Quarterly

tory)—sent Mosher some examples of his work. The result was that Mosher hired young Rogers to design the Portland (1895) edition of AE's *Homeward: Songs by the Way*, and in this way this book, with its original headbands and decorations, became the first book ever designed by Bruce Rogers. When Edward F. Stevens initiated the Book Arts Collection in the Colby College Library, Mosher's edition of AE's poems was among the first books presented. AE's *Homeward* has thus long held an honored place on the shelves of the Colby College Library. In time it was joined there by copies of the two Dublin editions.

Now, thanks to the benefaction of Mr. James A. Healy, of New York and Portland, these AE items find themselves surrounded by a host of AE material. Over the last two decades Mr. Healy has devoted himself to the task of building an outstanding collection of AE's work. Consisting of first editions—many inscribed and autographed—of nearly all of AE's poetry and prose writings, together with considerable manuscript material and over one hundred letters in AE's holograph, this collection is without question the most comprehensive library of AE material on this side of the Atlantic and equaled by few, if any, in Ireland itself. This special issue of the COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY will clearly reveal the extent of Mr. Healy's devotion to AE, and the opportunity his collection now offers to scholars.



### AN ANGELIC ANARCHIST

By OLIVER ST. JOHN GOGARTY<sup>1</sup>

**T**HERE was a time when men felt that over and above poetry, painting and music there were deeds that were better worth the doing, a time when the artist was not regarded as a complete human being, a time when, in fact,

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Gogarty has kindly given the COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY permission to use an excerpt from a chapter on AE in his forthcoming volume, *The Nine Worthies*.

## Colby Library Quarterly 25

the artist did not so regard himself, for then the popular instinct held that the whole man was more considerable than any of his productions. It is only of late years that to be an artist, a painter for instance, has become a recognised profession: when that which is a product is preferred to the man. With this attitude liberty is claimed by the artist and conceded by public opinion so that the personality of the artist may pass untrammelled into his art. Once such a claim is conceded, there is no limit to the licence that must be granted to the specialist; for, when the part suffices for the whole or the plum for the tree, the rest may riot and rot.

George Russell felt that absorption in any one of the arts would stint his life. He resisted the temptation to become an adept in any one of them though his genius could have made him eminent in any. This refusal was maintained by him consistently. He who could have been a religious genius belonged to no particular denomination. He who could have been a great poet was content to remain an interpreter. He who could have been a statesman refused the invitation of President Cosgrave to become a foundation member of the Irish Senate. He who could have been a competent painter resisted the greatest temptation of his life—"painting is the only thing I have any real delight in doing"—because he wished to keep his spirit free even from noble minds' last infirmity.

Yet, through his mysticism he belonged to all religions; through his painting he made his visions manifest; through his poetry he imparted his faith; and through his economics he taught the people more than they would have learnt or accepted from the narrow pulpit or politics . . . .

In AE's pen his power resided. To his writings, then, and not to his talk we must go for the terse phrase. Having written an aphorism he might quote it as a text to his talk; but they sprang from ink, not from mouthfuls of air. Take these examples:

## 26 Colby Library Quarterly

One of the very first symptoms of the loss of the soul is the loss of the sense of beauty.

What the lover discovers in the beloved is the beauty or poetry which is in his own being.

The blindness of love with respect to persons and causes may be justified because the purposes Nature has with us might never be fulfilled if we lived by reason alone and not by faith and imagination.

Nationalism in every country requires a strong admixture of internationalism to prevent it becoming a stupefying drug.

The worse our habits the more we have what is called good legislation. When there are good habits in a country the business of the state dwindles.

This last he may have remembered from some aphorisms of the Chinese.

He was accustomed to take his holidays in Donegal in a cottage owned by Jeannie Stewart not far from Dunfanaghy, one of the loveliest spots in Ireland so far north that the light is that of an Arctic summer and the ground is a mat of little yellow sessile roses. Sometimes he would go to stay with the Laws of Marble Hill where they built a studio in which he could work and sleep. It was a small cottage with an upper shelf or half room for a bedroom. From this he could go out to sit by the bays where the blue sea came gently in between walls of rock overhung with flowers. The happiest days of his life must have been passed here for he never failed to return, year in and year out, to Donegal. One summer I found him swimming in a rock pool there with Dermot O'Brien and some friends. His body was round and his shoulders shone as he swam with a breast stroke slowly in the blue water. His small arms seemed to come out from his body more than from his shoulders. He was somewhat corpulent for, after he had given up the laborious journeys all through Ireland when he was organising rural creameries, co-operative banks and societies, his life was sedentary.

If there was any hatred in AE it was directed at two criminal things; one the gombeen man, the other the State.

## Colby Library Quarterly 27

The gombeen man is usually a local trader who has absorbed most of the business in a village and has tied the small holders or farmers in debt to his books. Instead of advancing money to them he lends them the necessities of life, flour, tea and manures at his own prices. They have no other store with which to deal but his. If there were a rival establishment, to deal with it means immediate ruin for he will call in the debt of any who thus seek to escape from his blood-sucking tentacles. To circumvent these usurers AE's life for many years was devoted. To this end he never spared himself. In sleet or heat he would cycle through Ireland in his endeavour to found co-operative societies and rural banks that would advance money enough to free the gombeen man's customers.

Regarding the "State," it is a long cry to the time (if any) that it was identical with the common weal. Now, owing to the unwieldiness of the machinery of constitutional representation and to the discovery by those so elected of how plastic and gullible the public is, Governments too long in office become gangsters. Instead of being a servant of the masses, the State becomes a slave-driver. It expects that every man should subordinate his own interests and devote his life to it. It is worse than if you were to ask every man to become a policeman; or, as James Joyce expected, to devote his life to studying *Finnegan's Wake*.

AE sensed this tendency. Henry Wallace, in a speech he delivered after AE's death, tells how much impressed he was in his youth by a prophetic statement of AE

in which AE declared the inevitability of the greater role of the State in the life of the individual. AE was not a statistician, nor a classical economist, but in his preoccupation with the intangibles which give beauty and direction to life, he nevertheless had a sense of social trends.

AE in his book *The Avatars* makes one of his characters exclaim:

I declare to Heaven, which does not mind in the least, that there

## 28 Colby Library Quarterly

must be a devil in one if one is to understand the diabolism of the State. The State is the devil, or rather a multitude of devils. Its name is legion. It has been questing all about this region to find the fountain of unrest in society. At first men went about alone. But yesterday I found some dark and surly brutes together, exotic to this country, and I guess by that the old devil not dead in me yet, that they intend some devilry . . .

This is a kind of prophecy the truth of which becomes more and more apparent as the years advance. Its truth is more manifest now than when AE declared it. He was a seer and if there were not many other evidences of this, the statement quoted would be enough to prove his power of prophesying.

But it is not as painter, poet, or seer that I would acclaim AE and remember him but as a human being in whom goodness was innate and radiantly active . . . . That he was grateful for his good fortune appears from his words whispered to me as he lay "conscious of his own eternity" at the point of death: "I have realised all my ambitions. I have had an astounding interest in Life. I have great friends. What more can a man want?" There are many still alive who, like myself, consider themselves fortunate to have lived while AE was on earth. He was an angelic anarchist.



### AE: A PROPHET OUT OF AN ANCIENT AGE

*By* HENRY A. WALLACE

IT is a pleasure to write of AE because I looked on him as one of the finest, most gifted, and most colorful people I ever knew. During the first decade of this century my grandfather, Henry Wallace, had much correspondence with Sir Horace Plunkett, George W. Russell, and others in the Irish Coöperative movement. When I went to Europe in 1912 to study agriculture, my grandfather made it a number one order of business for me to visit AE. Before I went he had me read to him every day or two for half an