March 1973

The View From Sydney Cockerell

David K. Kirby

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

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 10, no.1, March 1973, p.41-53

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. For more information, please contact mkelly@colby.edu.
The name of Sydney Carlyle Cockerell (1867-1962) cannot be weighed by the number of people who would instantly recognize it today, but his three decades of service as Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge University (1908-1937) made him the most talked about practitioner in a field marked by occupational reticence. Starting improbably as a clerk in the family coal business, he developed himself into an authority on illuminated manuscripts, became secretary to William Morris and the Kelmscott Press, acted the same role for poet-orientalist Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, received honorary fellowships at Jesus and Downing colleges as well as a Litt. D. from Cambridge (with only two years at St. Paul's School), and was literary executor to Morris, Blunt, and Thomas Hardy.

Without benefit of any special training he literally transformed the Fitzwilliam from a mousey repository of miscellanea into one of the most distinguished centers of its kind, setting new norms for acquisition and exhibition of rarities in literature, music, painting, and other arts. Variouslly described by friends, victims, his son, and himself as “rather fierce,” immodest, ruthless, priggish, opinionated, portentous, intolerant, and rude, they nevertheless agreed that beneath his prickly exterior lurked a humanist who put friendship at the head of his values. This is confirmed by numberless men and women to whom he gave advice and comfort, “gifts of books and pictures, flowers and fruit,” money, visited when ill, remembered their birthdays and wedding anniversaries, helped with investments, arbitrated their quarrels, read their books in manuscript and corrected (“mercilessly”) their galleY proofs.1 In his last “Testimony and Appeal” he declared “FRIENDSHIP to be precious beyond all words. . .a plant that withers if it be

1 Wilfrid Blunt, Cockerell (London, 1964), 7. The author is a distant cousin of the poet.

Two examples of Cockerell's curmudgeonry: When one of his many Saved visitors wrote him about the “unforgettable” afternoon she had spent at his house he answered glacially that he had no memory of it whatsoever. A friend once asked if she might not in future address him as “Cocky,” because she always thought of him as that. It is not known what he answered in that case, but her next letter began, “Dear Sydney.”
not heedfully tended.” He was indubitably involute and unpredictable. On his death the London Times dubbed him a “character,” a judgment he had avouched long before: “Cockerellian—I am that, for good or ill, and cannot be otherwise, and shall remain so to the end of the chapter.”

For those who shy at formal biographies, preferring their own interpretation at closer hand, the quiddity that was Cockerell may not be abstracted from his public writings, for he restricted himself to bibliography, descriptions of pictorial illustrations, monographs on calligraphy and illuminated manuscripts, and a short history of the Kelmscott Press. A faint portrait of the man may be discerned, mirror-fashion, in two books of letters written to him by eminent friends, and edited by Viola Meynell: Friends of a Lifetime (1940), including Barrie, A. C. Benson, Blunt, Robert Bridges, Conrad, DeMorgan, Edward Garnett, Gosse, Lady Gregory, Hardy, Housman, Henry James, T. E. Lawrence, Morris, Ouida, Ruskin, Swinburne, Tolstoy, Yeats; and The Best of Friends (1956), Beerbohm, Belloc, Berenson, de la Mare, Ruth Draper, Alec Guinness, Laurence Housman, Shane Leslie, Desmond MacCarthy, Quiller-Couch, Sassoon, Shaw, Watts-Dunton, Field Marshall Wavell, and T. H. White. The second of these compilations contains a smattering of Cockerell’s replies, scarcely enough to devise a tenable profile. A full-figured drawing must wait publication of a representative selection from the thousands of his extant letters.

Colby College Library has 166 letters by Sydney Cockerell to Grace Mountcastle Martin (1892-1968) which afford useful insights toward a reconstitution of his quixotic personality—if one remembers that he was between 79 and 94 when he wrote them, and that he was addressing a woman, an American, an unabashed votarist, and a person to whom he was beholden. Mrs. Martin, one-time faculty member of Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, first wrote Cockerell in April 1934 after “I read the Diaries of Wilfrid Blunt and knew for a certainty there was a whole world not written about between Wilfrid Blunt and Lady Anne Blunt, Byron’s granddaughter. . . . and I thought something of writing about him.”

2 Ibid., xvii-xviii.
3 Martin to Richard Cary, March 1959. Quotations from letters and notes sent to me by Mrs. Martin are inserted hereafter without documentation.
ly acknowledged her interest and informed her that "No further volumes of the Diaries are likely to be issued at present, but Miss Edith Finch, of Bryn Mawr College, Pa., has been engaged on a memoir for some time." In September 1937 Mrs. Martin voyaged to England, was invited to tea at Kew Gardens. She recalled her host as "a brisk, carefully dressed man of 70 but looking very dapper and much younger" at the time. They sat—Lady Cockerell in the Bath Chair given her by Thomas Hardy—for two hours "by a cozy fire while the rain came in torrents...I held wonderful treasures in my hands while I was there—letters from Hardy, Butler (Samuel), Blunt, Rossetti, William Morris and many more."

Nothing transpired between Cockerell and Mrs. Martin in the next nine years. Then, on June 28, 1946 he sent her the first in an unbroken series of letters which stopped a month before he died in May 1962. These letters are not comparable as literary history to those he wrote his famous contemporaries. Out of them, however, may be gleaned several recurrent motifs which point to the essential ego (in the best sense) of the man. Mrs. Martin reestablished contact as the European phase of World War II wound down. "I knew in a small way what the people were suffering. I began to send parcels to all the people who had been so kind to me about my interest in Blunt." For the next six years she shipped bundles to Cockerell at the rate of about one a month and as many as three. Mrs. Martin’s largess, I can personally attest, was versatile and limitless. The flow of delicacies over which Cockerell’s cook “raised the loudest paeans” included: chocolate, raisins, almonds, egg powder, dried fruits, margarine, tapioca, black figs, apples, ham...China tea, puddings, condensed milk, mushrooms, brown sugar, rice, tins of pineapple, peaches, apricots and cooking fat, barley, candied peel, cocoa, tinned butter, cake compounds— one wonders at Mrs. Martin’s ingenuity in packaging some of these for survival over the arduous transatlantic haul.5


5 Edith Finch, Wilfrid Seawen Blunt (London, 1938). Cockerell approved the preparation of this book, vouched for Finch’s credentials, arranged meetings with helpful people, then defended her from attacks by the outraged daughter.
Among these comestibles Mrs. Martin managed to stuff an assortment of severely rationed articles: shaving cream, face tissues, soap flakes, razor blades, nylon stockings, hainets, plastic galoshes, handkerchiefs, scarves, and once even a fur coat for Cockerell's aging housekeeper. ("I didn't have one to give away," Mrs. Martin told me, "but a friend of mine did." Incorrigible!) Cockerell reacted with saltatory joy. Upon Mrs. Martin he showered his brightest adjectives, alluding seriatim to the parcels as grand, splendid, magnificent, lovely, fairy, noble, princely, royal, delectable, superlative, and one "a Goliath carton." He teased her with sleek, extended alliterations, now and again falling back upon the metaphor of argosies sailing into port trim and shipshape, laden with amazing cargoes. Having started at a heady level, he had no recourse but to scale higher and higher into hyperbole. After years of trying harder he lapsed into limpish humor: "I am thinking of writing to ask Mr. Truman to introduce a law to curb your generosity, which evidently has no bounds"; and, "I sent you, for I think the 137th time, my very best thanks."

In the beginning Cockerell was justifiably overjoyed by this cornucopia proffered in a bleak time. Gradually the sheer magnitude of Mrs. Martin's benevolence tinged his gratitude with embarrassment, made him uneasy. "I have exhausted my vocabulary of thanks," he exclaimed out of a frustrated sense of obligation. And as the austerity in England lifted, guilt assailed him. "You really must stop," he pleaded. To little avail. In 1952 and 1953 he again commended her "overflowing goodness" but admonished her "very earnestly about the cessation of parcels," insisting that the current parcel "be positively the last." Now she began to acquiesce—after her fashion. "His birthday is July 16," she wrote me, "but once he said: 'I get too many things on that day. Why can't some of them be scattered out?' This gave me the idea of remembering his birthday as early as February!" And March, and April, et seq. To the end of his days she continued to send parcels at intervals. He surrendered with grace. "I combine the heartiest thanks.

5 Besides spoilage, the hazards of travel were not inconsiderable in that afflicted era. Dock strikes on both sides impeded delivery; mice sampled the aromatic contents; packets arrived with the appearance of having been opened and some enumerated items "abstracted in transit"; once, only the empty wrapping of a parcel stamped as weighing nine pounds was delivered.
with gentle reprimands and remonstrances.”

Although Cockerell often alleged that he absconded “to my own lair” with the pick of the goodies, most found their way to his wife’s sickroom, were shared at tea with visitors, or (as appropriate) placed with female friends of the family. “PLEASE TELL ME WHAT I MAY SEND YOU,” he demanded of Mrs. Martin in pulsing capitals, and tried to reciprocate by the best means available to him in his straitened situation. He mailed to her regularly books written by his friends, which he autographed for her and, at Christmas, for her friends.\(^6\) He posted her a leaf of the Kelmscott Chaucer which he had seen through the press fifty years earlier, sheets of illuminated manuscripts, examples of distinctive calligraphy by English scribes and expository volumes on the subject. These, and multiple copies of his two letter books, failed to appease his feeling of arrears. “I regard myself as enormously in your debt,” he told her in a confessional mood, “and often have twinges of conscience concerning my feeble efforts to repay your recurring generosities. [Walter] de la Mare is in a stronger position as he can send inscribed copies of his many books and these are greatly prized by their recipients, who regard them as ample return for their parcels. But I am not a great author, or a great anything else, but only a successful museum official.”\(^7\) It was an albatross he could not shake off. Three years later he was still imploring, “Please name some books . . . so that I may not remain so much in your debt.”

Cockerell’s depiction of conditions in England for three years following the War is a curiously textured grammar of ambivalence, introversion, skepticism, and national pride. He did not scant the general malaise that hung over the country nor his individual eagerness to avert it, but habitually he minimized both with a kind of offhanded gallantry. After Mrs. Martin’s first gift he wrote:

Many of our friends suffered disastrously during the war. We were

---

\(^6\) More than a score of these—by Beerbohm, Isak Dinesen, de la Mare, Morris, Shaw, Stevenson, the Abbess of Stanbrook, and others—are now in the Colby College Library.

\(^7\) Most men of large self-appreciation have at least one point of admisible candor. This was Cockerell’s. He knew too many writers of sterling quality to delude himself that he could compete. He consistently refused solicitations to write or broadcast about William Morris, on whom he was an acknowledged authority, claiming inadequate faculty for such assignments.
lucky enough to get off with a few broken windows and a cracked wall . . . .

It is exceedingly good of you to contemplate sending a second parcel . . . . But you must not suppose that this country is starving. So many things that we took for granted are now unobtainable that the diet is apt to be very monotonous, but we are not undernourished though women who live alone fare badly.

Later in 1946 he spoke of his son Christopher at an international conference in America and of

the marvellous food he is enjoying—turkey, chickens, eggs, melons, and lots of other delicacies that we are now unaccustomed to here—and he makes our mouths water—though we are quite well nourished on our monotonous diet and we have no reason to complain.

Fuel is going to be more difficult than ever in the coming winter, especially if we have a very cold spell. Owing to the wrecked condition of Europe, conditions are much less favourable than we all expected them to be as soon as hostilities came to an end. What an insane creature man is to engage in such wholesale killing and destruction. After our use of the atomic bomb I cannot see that we can afford to say too much about German atrocities . . . . What will the world be like a century hence? I am thankful that I entered it when I did and so enjoyed a long spell of tranquillity in the best of company.

His year-end greeting piped a similar duet of communal gloom and personal cheer, opening with “The poor distracted and disrupted world will say good riddance to 1946” and closing with “[I] who am blessed with so many kind friends and with excellent health.” Was this perhaps superstition (deflect the Eumenides by wiles) or a species of self-beatification (And of all these—I alone . . . )

In 1947 Cockerell’s outlook took on an unrelieved Spenglerian cast. “We are in a fine stew over here. It remains to be seen whether the tired population of this country can pull itself together . . . . Manifestly disaster lies ahead of us if we do not buckle to.” Again: “All Europe is out of gear. One does not see how the gigantic damage of the war can be repaired within a decade. And at the end of it what new calamities may not put all present ones in the shade!” But in his final words on the matter, July 30, 1948, he returned to his dichotomous refrain: “civilization seems to be distinctly on the wane. I feel that I have been very lucky in the period of my existence.” What emerges, persuasively, is Cockerell’s unshakeable faith in
his special destiny, an anointed mortal moving immune through circumstances which blight the ordinary. It was this belief in self which drove him to the pinnacle of his profession and installed him, dauntless, among the giants of his time.

Cockerell was not unaware of the piquancy attaching to notable names familiarly dropped, and so he periodically regaled Mrs. Martin with a spray of newsworthy peers and peeresses, statesmen and generals, panjandrums of other stripe with whom he had lunched, encountered at a showing or performance, or had come to his house. These may be overlooked here, for as Blunt says, “Cockerell never learnt that dull information about famous people could never be anything but dull” (p.6). More acutely important to an understanding of Cockerell are his sporadic remarks about literary personages, to whom as a group he obviously felt the strongest affinity. Some he mentioned passingly—William Morris, Rupert Brook, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (surprisingly, in view of Mrs. Martin’s interest), the Rossettis, Angela Thirkell (whom he knew for fifty years), Samuel Butler, and Ouida. Of the last (Louise de la Ramée, a woman of original slant and acrid tongue) he said only: “Ouida was a remarkable woman and very gifted. Her misfortune was to have no looks, which increased her vanity and pride and so ruined her.” This asperity may have sprung roots at the time of Cockerell’s engagement. She predicted grumly: “Your golden hair will soon grow gray... it is really suicide... With sincere regret for the irreparable error.”

In the face of Cockerell’s far more intimate association with Thomas Hardy, it is mystifying to find only one brief, banal paragraph and one lateral allusion in this entire sheaf of letters. Beginning in 1911 Hardy left to Cockerell’s discretion the free distribution of his manuscripts to deserving libraries. Cockerell became a steady visitor at Max Gate, they made expeditions to the scenes of Hardy’s novels, and Cockerell scribbled suggestions on proof sheets of later works which Hardy adopted. Hardy named Cockerell his literary executor, in which capacity he arranged burial in Westminster Abbey and presided, with Mrs. Hardy, at burnings of the novelist’s papers. In spite of Mrs. Martin’s assertion that Cockerell’s comments on people

8 “He was afraid of nobody,” says Blunt, 137.
9 Viola Meynell, editor, Friends of a Lifetime (London, 1940), 152.
were "extraordinarily penetrating and honest," T. E. Lawrence—author of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, whom Cockerell met frequently in Hardy's home and at Cambridge—received the same attention, a couple of noncommittal passages. It may be speculated that Cockerell was saving his revelations of these two for eventual memoirs, but he disaffirmed any intention of writing them, and never did.

The reverse is true about George Bernard Shaw, with whom Cockerell stayed on excellent terms for more than six decades. Cockerell watched Shaw during his final four years with clinical intensity, seeing him no doubt as an antecessor in longevity and matching his own life-pattern against Shaw's, as once he openly averred: "Like Bernard Shaw I did not kiss a woman until I was 28—and then she kissed me first!" (Blunt, 338). After lunching with Shaw in May 1947 Cockerell observed: "We found him brisk and alert in mind and body, though easily tired." Cockerell told Mrs. Martin that his 83rd birthday "went off in the pleasantest way"—"Very different from Bernard Shaw, who wrote me the day after his 94th birthday 'yesterday was hell!'". He proceeded to enlarge on all its terrors. Shaw's review of a book on William Morris in 1950 Cockerell found "bad and inaccurate," although in several recent letters Shaw's mind seemed "on the whole ... very alert." "But," he adjoined, "he can no longer walk any distance." It was a condition Cockerell was keenly fighting off, and he could not help savoring his momentary superiority.

When Shaw died, Cockerell recapitulated their years together with unsentimental praise for Shaw and characteristic reassurance for himself.

I was relieved when I got the news of Shaw's death, as his work was finished and he was longing to go. My memory of him goes back to 1886, but I did not actually make his acquaintance until 1889. In 1891 and again in 1894 he and I went to Italy with a party of members of the Art Workers' Guild. Not being artists we were make-weights and not members, though we were both subsequently elected honorary members. Since those days we have been very good friends. I have more than twenty volumes inscribed by him, as well as the original of *John Bull's Other Island*. How interesting that you acted in his plays. Besides being an extraordinary genius, he was a man of the utmost rectitude of conduct, very scrupulous and considerate, and very generous on the sly. He was utterly without vindictiveness or malice. His departure causes another great gap in my world...
Shaw forbade any religious observance at his funeral. Among other secular exercises, between selections from Elgar’s *Enigma Variations* and Verdi’s *Requiem* Cockerell read from the words of Mr. Valiant in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, a book Shaw esteemed highly. Cockerell also acted as his literary executor until replaced by the Public Trustee.

Shaw was not likely to draw anyone’s sentimental impulses to the surface, least of all Cockerell who reserved his for doting women. One exception was Walter de la Mare, for a long time his neighbor in Twickenham. Cockerell spoke unblushingly of him as “the most lovable of men” and “the very dearest of dears,” declaring himself unable to “describe to you his natural unstudied charm.” In the autumn of 1948 de la Mare had “some severe illnesses . . . so I do not see him often, though we are on affectionate terms”; in December 1950 Cockerell visited de la Mare “and enjoyed nearly three hours of his perfect conversation.” He admired “some of his verse and prose enormously” and was depressed when his “very dear friend” passed on in June 1956, particularly because their homes were only three miles apart and “During the last 4½ years of my imprisonment in my room we have been unable to meet, as he was in much the same fix.” Nowhere else in this correspondence does Cockerell render himself so vulnerable.

At the other end of the scale, where only his intellect was engaged, Cockerell could bear the corrosion of a human being with a figurative shrug. In the case of Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen) he was even less affected by adversity than he was in the case of Ouida. He met the author “by the luckiest of chances” and became “deeply interested” in her books, which he listed for Mrs. Martin on July 10, 1947. In response to her queries he wrote:

She is a Dane and lives in Denmark, but her husband, Baron Blixen, was, I think a Swede. I believe that in Kenya he became attached to another charmer and forsook Karen altogether. All her other books are powerful rather macabre stories: *Seven Gothic Tales*, *Winter’s Tales*,
50 Colby Library Quarterly

and The Angelic Avengers by ‘Pierre Andrèzel.’ I am told that the last book has had an immense success in America. It is a rather shapeless fantasy, written without much premeditation as a diversion when Denmark was under German occupation.

In December he received a long sad letter from Dinesen. It moved him merely to say that ‘She has been in hospital, but she seems to be recovering,’ and that he considered her Out of Africa ‘a veritable masterpiece.’ Two years later he exported his last words about her, on the level of heartless gossip: ‘I have heard nothing of Karen Blixen for a very long while. She is, I believe, a chronic invalid, and addicted to drugs.’

Except for Thoreau, of whom ‘as a young man I was a great admirer’ (he possessed a first edition of Walden and explored the pond during his one short stay in America), Cockerell was fairly obtuse concerning prominent Americans. His vaunted memory nodded as regards Henry James. ‘I don’t think I ever met Henry James,’ he remarked to Mrs. Martin—the contradicting irony in his own letter book, Friends of a Lifetime (p. 263): ‘I have the very pleasantest recollection of your kind entertainment of me, after our breakfast together, in your generous hall last summer,’ wrote James after this occasion at the Fitzwilliam, arranged in expectation that he would contribute some of his manuscripts. Will Rogers fared no better. ‘Who was Will Rogers?’ asked Cockerell. ‘He seems to have been very unsensitive, or else to have been very fortunate in his associates.’ And when Mrs. Martin quoted Henry Adams from a letter to his brother—‘Man has mounted science and is now run away with. I firmly believe that before many centuries science will be the master of man . . . . Some day science may have the existence of mankind in its power, and the human race commit suicide by blowing up the world.’—Cockerell responded casually, ‘I do not know Henry Adams,’ allowed that the prognostications were ‘remarkable,’ then slyly attributed the theme of machines getting the better of humanity to ‘my friend Samuel Butler’ in Erewhon. As an extra barb, he threw in—‘a book with which you are sure to be familiar.’ In these three instances Cockerell showed himself, deliberate or not, a skilful minister of the ‘Henry who?’ putdown.

One American he treated with total graciousness was Ruth Draper (1884-1956), internationally acclaimed diseuse, recip-
Cockerell was 79 years old when he began his serial correspondence with Mrs. Martin. It is not unusual then that the issue of his health should occupy him frequently and, indeed, constitute a prevailing theme from first to last. At so great an age it could be excused him if he unloosed a constant flow of querulous complaint. The contrary is true. He had an evolving train of infirmities to report—eye irritation, colds, bronchitis, giddiness, fatigue, injured patella, influenza, heart attack, swoons, failing sight and hearing—yet he did this in a manner to reflect vast credit upon himself. He faced these conditions realistically, never whined, sought to pass them off as fleeting nuisances. He referred to his eye and chest impairments as "tiresome." Marking the trend of long sieges of illness he would exclaim with determined buoyancy: "I am now shaking it off"; "I expect to feel quite frisky"; "I think I shall soon be well"; "Have recovered and have been rather gay." He joked about approaching senility and took consolation in friends older than himself "who were all fairly brisk mentally."

After a near-fatal "heart block" in 1952 which put him in bed for the remaining ten years of his life, Cockerell surveyed his situation with greater gravity but no less fortitude. "I have
nothing to complain of," he said repeatedly. "I have no pain and I have excellent nurses." Mostly he regretted his inability to keep up his former pace. "Often I feel enfeebled and cannot put pen to paper." "I grow older and feeble." "I am feeling my age (90) a good deal—sight, hearing, motion, wits, all deteriorating steadily." "I grow more and more silly and forgetful." "At 91 that is what one must expect," he summed up stoically. At this point he began dictating the letters, adding the valediction and signing himself. By January 9, 1962 he was reduced to reading little except newspapers and hearing no music. "I am of no use to anybody," he asserted morosely, then instantly changed tack. "If I could depart painlessly in the middle of the night I should be glad. I have had an exceptionally interesting life and on the whole have been very fortunate." In his last letter to Mrs. Martin on March 28 he proclaimed serenely: "It is a mistake to live to 94 3/4." Nevertheless he was inherently glad to have made it. In 1922 he had written: "I would ask no better than to repeat my own life, mistakes, follies and all, knowing how much more than my proper share of good fortune I have had."11

The conviction that he was gifted and different sustained Sydney Cockerell over a span of nearly a hundred years. Coupled with his supreme knack of convincing others of his uniqueness, they insured his position at the hub of a prime circle of illustrati, free to speak and behave outrageously. Regal in appearance, uncompromising in action, he imposed upon even his closest friends the illusion of an otherworldly presence. "In the quiet candle-lit room," one of them ruminated, "he seemed a bearded and spectacled magician, conjuring up . . . medieval illuminated missals and psalters . . . to be contradicted by Cockerell was an education."12 And by sheer exertion of will he perpetuated this myth of superhuman corporeity to the end. His biographer describes him at 94: "His cheeks were still rosy, his beard dapper; in his neat little skull-cap he looked like the late self-portraits of Titian" (Blunt, 3). It is not specious to conclude that Cockerell was one of the world's most successful self-made men.

SYDNEY CARLYLE COCKERELL
1867 - 1962