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"THE CLAM-DIGGER: CAPITOL ISLAND":  
A ROBINSON SONNET RECOVERED

By RICHARD CARY

On page 2 of *The Reporter Monthly* for April 26, 1890 appears the following sonnet by Edwin Arlington Robinson not yet attributed to him in any bibliography or checklist.

THE CLAM-DIGGER  
CAPITOL ISLAND

There is a garden in a shallow cove  
Planted by Neptune centuries ago,  
Which Ocean covers with a thin, flat flow,  
Then falling, leaves the sun to gleam above  
Those oozy lives (which reasoning mortals love)  
Reposed in slimy silence far below  
The shell-strewn desert, while their virtues grow,  
And over them the doughty diggers rove.

Then awful in his boots the King appears,  
With facile fork and basket at his side;  
Straight for the watery bound the master steers,  
Where giant holes lie scattered far and wide;  
And plays the devil with his bubbling dears  
All through the bounteous, ottoitic tide.

R.

In compiling his sturdy *Bibliography of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New Haven, 1936), Charles Beecher Hogan did record and reprint two other primigenial poems from this four-page literary supplement of the *Kennebec Reporter*: "Thalia," March 29, 1890, as Robinson's first known publication of verse; "The Galley Race," May 31, 1890, as his second (at this point clearly to be reclassified third). Robinson's full surname certifies these two poems. Hogan may have overlooked the slighter identification of "The Clam-Digger" by initial, or he may have judged it insufficient to admit this sonnet into the canon. The burden of evidence, circumstantial and internal, favors inclusion.

Capitol Island, less than a mile long north and south, is in Boothbay Harbor, Maine. For several decades at the end of the nineteenth century, it served as a summer vacation site almost exclusively for families from Gardiner and Augusta.

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Chard Powers Smith notes that for “time out of mind the Robinsons had rented the white Collins cottage there, on the southeastern seaward cliff” (*Where the Light Falls: A Portrait of Edwin Arlington Robinson* [New York, 1965], 89). Robinson was unquestionably in residence on the island during the two summers preceding publication of “The Clam-Digger,” for it was then and there that he met, wooed, and lost Emma Shepherd — she married his brother Herman in February 1890 — who “found room and board” with a friend “three doors north of the Collins cottage” (p. 90). Robinson was not one to drink soda pop and sing with the groups on front porches, nor did he take part in the available popular sports. He roamed the island incessantly, perched on the great granite peak, stared brooding at the vast seascape, and clambered down the sharp slope to the sea itself. His stored impressions of this place crop up in recognizable figments for many years thereafter in his poems, notably “Eros Turannos,” “Vain Gratuities,” “The Clinging Vine,” “Late Summer,” “Avon’s Harvest,” “Octave XXIII,” “The Return of Morgan and Fingal,” and in *Tristram* the cold waves, the cold Cornish rocks, and the white birds flying. One day that lone, majestic clammer striding through the tide must have caught his eye and jogged his muse.

The appearance of “The Clam-Digger” — in fact, of all three poems — in *The Reporter Monthly* may be ascribed largely to the influence of Caroline Davenport Swan, former schoolteacher and, during Robinson’s teens, hostess of the Gardiner Poetry Society which met at her home to discuss the art of poetry and read their own creations to each other. The Society was not so forbidding an organization as its unofficial title might imply. It was quite informal, “a little Club,” as Miss Swan dubbed it, consisting mostly of herself, Dr. Alanson Tucker Schumann, Judge Henry Sewall Webster, and later the novice Robinson. The four met regularly each week, and were occasionally augmented by William Henry Thorne, eccentric editor of *The* (N.Y.) *Globe*, and Kate Vannah, a local esthete. Miss Swan, doyenne of the group, repeatedly proclaimed her scorn of “the polish of over-elegance” and “creators of prettiness.” These exhortations visibly affected the works of Robinson and Webster, though they left Schumann unruffled in his blander mode.

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On January 25, 1890 the *Kennebec Reporter*, published in Gardiner since 1865, began offering an appendant of four pages of poems, fiction, and familiar essays on the last weekend of each month. No individual was designated as editor in the preliminary announcements or subsequent issues of *The Reporter Monthly*, but from the first number onward Caroline Swan's name dominated its columns in all three genres, and the poems and Schumann and Webster were conspicuously in view. (Shortly, Miss Swan surfaced also as conductor of a "Young People's Corner" of selected verse.) It takes no great stress of logic to presume that she urged Robinson to submit some of his compositions to this home town outlet. Doubtlessly thrilled by the guarantee of publication and reassured by his high regard for E. W. Morrell, the paper's editor (see Denham Sutcliffe, ed., *Untriangulated Stars: Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson to Harry DeForest Smith 1890-1905* [Cambridge, Mass., 1947], 21), Robinson acceded. A search through the remaining issues of the short-lived supplement reveals no other contributor with an initial *R* whose poems remotely resemble "The Clam-Digger" in tautness, tone, vigor, or diction. One other factor: all three Robinson poems were superscribed [Written for the Reporter Monthly.] — in the case of "The Galley Race," [Translated for . . .] — not a unique feature but neither, for that matter, a unanimous practice in the monthly supplement.

The person whose impress far exceeded Miss Swan's in Robinson's shaping years was Schumann, a physician who preferred poetry to pathology. Older than Robinson by more than two decades, Schumann early recognized the boy's superior gift and selflessly emboldened him in his efforts. Harking back to his probationary days, circa 1889, Robinson said:

I was chiefly occupied with the composition of short poems and sonnets, which I would read to my old friend and neighbor, Dr. A. T. Schumann, who was himself a prolific writer of sonnets, ballades and rondeaus, and a master of poetic technique. As I shall never know the extent of my indebtedness to his interest and belief in my work, or to my unconscious absorption of his technical enthusiasm, I am glad for this opportunity to acknowledge a debt that I cannot even estimate . . . I am sure that he was one of the most remarkable technicians that ever lived, and an invaluable friend to me in those years of apprenticeship . . . ("The First Seven Years," *The Colophon*, Part Four [December 1930], n.p.)

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Schumann was truly a wizard of precision for whom technique was all, or nearly all. Leaving aside reams of intricate French forms which he contrived, each type of which Robinson imitated and published, Schumann wrote literally thousands of sonnets, about a dozen sonnets on the sonnet, and a prose exposition on the sonnet. Regularity of frame and rhyme obsessed him. With pedantic sonority he declared: "If the form of verse called Petrarchan made use of so successfully be the sonnet, and if its mechanism, especially the rhyme-arrangement of its major system or octave be essential to the name, any deviation from this rhyme-arrangement is fatal to the word sonnet being applied to it." And in one of his sonnets on the sonnet he averred: "Dost think to carve this jewel without toil? / . . . It is a diamond fixed within a coil / Of finest gold."

From all this Robinson learned, and learned to defect. At first he played the willing mime. "The sonnet is a crown, whereof the rhymes / Are for Thought's purest gold the jewel-stones," he exclaimed in one of his own sonnets on the sonnet. Soon aware of his dissimilitude, he was calling for a poet

To put these little sonnet-men to flight  
Who fashion, in a shrewd mechanic way,  
Songs without souls that flicker for a day  
To vanish in irrevocable night.

To a friend he complained that "Schumann has written some very warm blooded sonnets lately and takes infinite delight in reading them to me. They are [hardly?] refreshing to one who has heard again and again some two hundred and fifty of the things written in the same style and the same vein" (Sutcliffe, 181). His criteria were already more arduous. "I am too fussy. I have fiddled too much over sonnets and ballades. I demand a certain something in the arrangement of words, and more in their selection, that I find in a very few of our writers today" (p. 115), and of course a crest of thought more robust than the delicate iridescent tiara he and his mentor had so glibly devised.

The effect of association with Schumann was nevertheless striking, particularly in the decade preceding Robinson's publication of his first book, *The Torrent and The Night Before* (1896). Schumann wrote sonnets on Poe, Arnold, Crabbe, and Hardy, as did Robinson, and Schumann was still sending Robinson fair copies of his poems as late as 1905 (Colby College

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collection). Schumann's homage to Petrarchan rhyme scheme was virtually idolatrous: of some 200 sonnets examined, published or in manuscript, not a single octave strays from the ABBAABBA pattern; 110 rhyme CDECDE in the sestet, 69 rhyme CDCDCD, 16 varying in the three-rhyme order, and 6 in the two-rhyme order. Of 6 Schumann sonnets on the sonnet, 4 rhyme ABBAABBA CDCDCD, and 3 employ the major metaphor and imagery of the sea breaking on the beach.

The numerical ratio of Robinson's sonnets is indicatively similar: of 30 sonnets published in this impressionable period only 3 veer from the rhyme scheme ABBAABBA in the octave; 15 rhyme CDECDE in the sestet, 3 rhyme CDCDCD, 8 varying in the three-rhyme order, and 3 in the two-rhyme order. ("The Garden" has three rhymes in the octave but alternates two rhymes EFEFEF in the sestet.) Overall, Robinson emulated Schumann in the consistency of octaves, followed his preference for CDECDE sestets, but experimented much more freely with the latter.

The rhyme scheme of "The Clam-Digger," ABBAABBA CDCDCD, conforms in both segments with three other sonnets Robinson wrote in the same interval: "Supremacy," "For a Book by Thomas Hardy," and "Kosmos." "Menoetes," "The Miracle," and "George Crabbe" accord with the octave and depart only slightly from the two-rhyme order of the sestet. Robinson's five alliterative pairs in "The Clam-Digger" rate minutely below Schumann's average for the sonnet, and the sea's "shoreward-sweeping" waves, its perpetual ebb and flow, the gleaming sands and spare vegetation reappear habitually in Schumann's sonnets on the sonnet. Robinson was soon to seize the oars and row his own course, but in this early instance Schumann's indoctrination is undeniably prevalent.

Further corroboration of Robinson's partiality for the Petrarchan arrangement comes in a letter to Harry Smith, dated less than six months after the appearance of "The Clam-Digger": "Did you ever read any of Keats' sonnets? They are great. To my mind they are the greatest in the English language" (Sutcliffe, 4). Of the five he specifically mentions, two have the identical rhyme scheme of "The Clam-Digger," one rhymes ABBAABBA CDECDE, another follows the Shakespearian mode, the fifth completely variant. Of 55 sonnets by John

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Keats, 37 rhyme ABBAABBA in the octave and 19 of these conclude CDCDCD in the sestet. In March 1894 Robinson was still commending this punctilious arrangement to Smith, citing Hartley Coleridge's "Let me not deem that I was made in vain" (Sutcliffe, 139). Among other English poets Robinson expressly admired during this formative season were Milton, Wordsworth, and Dante Rossetti, all artificers of the bipartite Italian sonnet which tolerates no more than five rhymes.

Several parallels to idiosyncratic usages in "The Clam-Digger" may be discerned in other poems Robinson was writing in the late 80s-early 90s:

a) He utilized the same opening gambit in "Supremacy," "There is a drear and lonely tract of hell . . . A flat, sad land . . ."; and in "The Garden," "There is a fenceless garden overgrown," which also embraced the garden image.

b) He resorted recurrently to a monosyllabic brace of adjectives ("thin, flat" in line 3 of "The Clam-Digger") to obtain acceleration of cadence and, in the majority of cases, a value of assonance: "flat, sad" in "Supremacy"; "thin, dim" in "Thomas Hood"; "thin, pinched" in "Aaron Stark"; "thin still" and "lone long" in "A Poem for Max Nordau."

c) He matched the density of alliteration and indeed surpassed it in "Thalia" (published March 1890) and in "Isaac Pitman" (May 1890), where he approached atrocity with "humming human hive" and "princely pageant of posterity." Alliteration persists over the following two years but is strategically extended and diminished ("Thomas Hood," "I Make No Measure of the Words They Say").

d) He capitalized and personified "Ocean" in line 3, as he did "Sorrow" in "Thalia"; "Fame" in "Isaac Pitman" and "Three Quatrains, I"; "Glory" in the latter; "Thought" in "The Garden" and "Sonnet" (The master and the slave); "Duty" in "Triplet"; "Fancy," "Pride," "Passion," "Mirth," and "Pain" in "In Harvard 5."

e) Images of shallow water, the shoreward rush of the spreading sea, and Neptune appear also in "The Galley Race," and the "worn, wave-eaten shore" in "Horace to Leuconoë."

The voice is indisputably the voice of young Edwin Arlington Robinson and, from whatever viewpoint taken, the accessory evidence attests his authorship of "The Clam-Digger."

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A word about the word "ottoitic" in the closing line. It derives from the cognomen of Nikolaus A. Otto (1832-1891), now remembered as inventor of a four-stroke cycle internal combustion engine. In the late 70s, however, his name was bestowed upon the dicycle, a kind of velocipede whose two wheels were parallel to each other instead of being in the same line as in a bicycle. Hence, the rider of an otto was called an ottoist. Robinson analogized the rise and fall of pedals to the ebb and flow of tides. He may have deliberately altered the adjectival ending in an exercise of poetic license, but a firmer probability is that *The Reporter Monthly* committed a typographical error, which would be consonant with the three in "The Galley Race," published in its pages a month later.



[EDITOR'S NOTE: *Last October the Colby College Press issued its latest volume, Early Reception of Edwin Arlington Robinson: The First Twenty Years, by Richard Cary. Provoked by the lack of recognition accorded Robinson during the time he was writing his finest poems, Cary sought the answer to this anomaly in the seventy reviews and interviews (between 1896-1916) listed by Robinson's bibliographers.*

*Unsatisfied that this sparse number represented the total published in that twenty-year period, Cary instituted a day-by-day, page-by-page search of over eighty newspapers and periodicals. After extensive investigation of every amenable resource, approximately ninety hitherto unlisted items were unearthed, edited, and interpolated into the book.*

*Although there was now a sufficiency of evidence to support the author's thesis, the realization persisted that numerous other notices still lay unrecovered in publications not examined in remoter geographical areas. In an article not yet printed then, Cary appealed to scholars in those locations to contribute their findings.*

*An ancient believer in serendipity, Cary now also believes in*

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*extra-sensory perception. One morning, long before his book or article could possibly have been known to his correspondent, Cary received the following script from Professor Monteiro of Brown University. It is, hopefully, just numero uno in a long line of fruitful additions to the Robinson bibliography.]*

### “THE PRESIDENT AND THE POET”: ROBINSON, ROOSEVELT, AND *THE TOUCHSTONE*

By GEORGE MONTEIRO

In 1905 Edwin Arlington Robinson, then down and nearly out in New York City, received a most gratifying letter from the President of the United States. Theodore Roosevelt had recently been shown a copy of *The Children of the Night* (1897) and he had decided to tell the author that he liked his poems. Subsequent correspondence between the poet and the president resulted in Roosevelt's persuading Scribner's to bring out a second edition of *The Children of the Night* and, even more immediately securing a place for Robinson in the United States Customs Service in New York. The place was to be a poet's sinecure. "I expect you to think poetry first and Treasury second," he insisted in a letter to the poet. And so it would be until 1909 when, upon Roosevelt's leaving office, Robinson also left his sinecure. But for the poet the episode was decisive. As he wrote years later, to the President's son, "I don't like to think of where I should be now if it had not been for your astonishing father. He fished me out of hell by the hair of the head."

Roosevelt's generosity toward Robinson evoked a number of mixed responses in the public journals, among them *The Touchstone*, a short-lived periodical (five monthly issues, January through May 1906), published by Sherwin Cody in Chicago. Its first issue carries a satiric account of Roosevelt's intercession on behalf of one "Edward" Arlington Robinson (pp. 10-11) along with the "first printing" of a revised "Richard Cory" (p. 11). Reproduced in facsimile, primarily for the sake of the illustrations, both items are new to Robinson bibliography.