



the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

FREDERICK ROLFE [aka Baron Corvo] (1860-1913)



Photographer unknown. Frederick Rolfe [aka Baron Corvo] at the Scots College in Rome, Italy. C 1890. Black and white photograph. The Granger Collection, New York.

Frederick William Serafino Austin Lewis Mary Rolfe (who assumed the name Baron Corvo) was a prolific author of verse, tales, historical fiction, travel sketches, and quasi-autobiographical novels. He began his literary career in the 1890s with publications in several important journals, including *The Artist and Journal of Home Culture* and *The Yellow Book*. He is best known today for his fictional trilogy—

Nicholas Crabbe (composed 1900-1904, published in 1958), *Hadrian the Seventh* (1904), and *The Desire and the Pursuit of the Whole*

(expurgated version published in 1934, complete

version in 1993). These works combine outlandish personal circumstance, homoerotic yearning, an often ornate or baroque prose style, a defiant impiety against Catholic Church officialdom, and high-spirited invective against the protagonists' perceived enemies. The novels are based in part on incidents in Rolfe's life as a hardscrabble writer, ardent lover of young men, and querulous religious dissident.

Born into a middle-class Anglican family (the father was a piano manufacturer), Rolfe was raised in Cheapside, London. He started out as a painter, fitfully tried to become a Catholic priest while a seminary student in Rome, and then lived for several years in Venice. He ended his last days there, alienated from the English colony that had once embraced him, a penniless, isolated figure reduced to

sleeping in gondolas, dying in 1913 at the age of 53 of a massive heart attack. He is the subject of what literary historians often cite as the first postmodern biographical study, A.J.A. Symons's self-described "experiment in biography," *The Quest for Corvo* (1934).

Rolfe's earliest artistic endeavours in the 1880s and 1890s consisted of paintings partly made up of embroidery and homoerotic verse. Throughout the 1880s, Rolfe studied at Scotts College in Rome where, dressed in black soutane and ecclesiastical robes, he became an admired but also controversial figure. (While a student, he petitioned the Bishop of Aberdeen for permission to use funds left for the Catholic poor to finance an underwater photography scheme.) Rolfe thrived in Rome, forming friendships with the Italian cognoscenti, aristocrats, and working-class youths. Given these and other non-theological enthusiasms, it is hardly surprising that seminary officials decided that Rolfe was not a fit candidate for the priesthood. He left the college in 1890, an experience that, in his novel *The Weird of the Wanderer* (1912), Rolfe characterizes as "one of the many incredibly cruel and unspeakably hideous happenings which marred[...] and soured" him (20). It was the first of many rancorous professional and personal breeches that marked Rolfe's colourful life.

Rolfe returned to London but, financially strapped, soon took up residence in Aberdeen, Scotland, which he found more affordable. In 1898, he published an article in *The Wide World Magazine* entitled "How I Was Buried Alive." The article's far-fetched claims prompted *The Daily Free Press* of Aberdeen to publish a vitriolic series of exposés of "Baron Corvo," claiming the author was a reckless poseur. These articles were reprinted in numerous Catholic periodicals. Wounded but with characteristic resilience, Rolfe left Aberdeen for England in an attempt to earn a living through writing and amateur photography. He was briefly hired as a photographer by the journalist and editor W.T. Stead.

Rolfe's first success as a writer came with what he called his "folk-lore," stories narrated by a fictional Italian peasant boy named Toto and his friend. These

semi-covert homoerotic tales first appeared in volumes 7, 9, and 11 of *The Yellow Book* in 1895 and 1896. A series of playful rewritings of Christian tales that stressed their pagan dimension, the Toto narratives comprise idealized accounts of Italian peasant culture that the critic Colin Cruise has likened to W.B. Yeats's mythologizing of Irish folk culture in such 1890s works as *The Celtic Twilight* (130). In Rolfe's telling in the Toto stories, the Roman soldier Sebastian is not a steadfast future Catholic saint but a sort of Christian Peter Pan. With a similar stress on the pagan sources for Christian myths, Rolfe's narrative of the life of Saint George is a Christian version of the life of Perseus. In later work such as *The Weird of the Wanderer* and *Don Tarquino*, Rolfe returned to the theme of a glorious paganism as it permeates the Christian world.

Inspired by the success of his Toto writings, Rolfe implored John Lane to hire him as a reader or editor of *The Yellow Book*. No such position was tendered, but in 1898 the Toto tales were reprinted in volume form by Lane under the title *Stories Toto Told Me* and then as a sequel *In His Own Image* (1901). The books were well received by critics. "A beautiful fancy that seduces one into thinking it quite the most delightful thing," wrote *The Twentieth Century* of *In His Own Image*, "which, of course, it isn't, but it is very nearly, really" (qtd. in Leslie xxvii). Owing to the success of these stories, in February 1899 Rolfe left the Hollywell workhouse in Wales where he had been working and traveled to Oxford, where he formed a friendship with E.G. Hardy, a Tutor at Jesus College. Later, in London, Rolfe became a regular at the Hogarth Club, much frequented by 1890s aesthetes such as Aubrey Beardsley, Max Beerbohm, John Gray, and Robbie Ross, although by some accounts Rolfe was the shabbily dressed outsider to this group.

Given the fears fomented by the Oscar Wilde trials, Rolfe's writings throughout the 1890s and after are extraordinary for their overt homoerotic rhapsodizing. In fact, in the period following the fin de siècle Rolfe became bolder in his choice of erotically charged same-sex material. For example, his novel *Nicholas Crabbe* (1904) – in which Henry Harland appears as Sidney Thorah, infamous editor of *The Blue Volume* – Rolfe parallels Crabbe's professional struggle with his

infatuation with the pretty, twentyish man Kemp. In his unpublished works and correspondence, Rolfe was even more emphatic about his admiration for the physiques of young men.

After much wrangling with publishers, Rolfe's *Chronicles of the House of Borgia* (1901) brought him praise from Harland and renewed public attention. If Walter Pater had located in Renaissance Italy an artistic ideal for nineteenth-century aesthetes, Rolfe found in early modern political history an exciting, intrigue-laden pageant that rendered Queen Victoria's reign relatively colourless in comparison. A lover of social and religious hierarchies, although paradoxically himself a financially strapped writer repeatedly scorned by the Catholic Church, Rolfe was described by one of his earliest admirers, Shane Leslie, as a "medieval Tory" (xxvii). He considered himself a fierce opponent of socialism, evident in the rant against English socialists in *Hadrian the Seventh*.

Although some early critics skewered Rolfe for his literary preciosities (the *Times Literary Supplement* derided his writing as "caviar" in 1924 [qtd. In Symons 18]), other twentieth-century writers saw him as a writer of indelibly original works. D.H. Lawrence seemed to address the *TLS's* concerns when he observed that, if Rolfe's work "is caviare, at least it came out of the belly of a real fish" (242). Critical and biographical studies tend to construe him as impossible to categorize. Graham Greene praised Rolfe as a novelist of genius who wrote from the "devil's side" ("From" 134). W.H. Auden considered Rolfe a vexingly brilliant "paranoid" and a master of "vituperation" (vii-viii), while David Lodge deemed *Hadrian the Seventh* to be an existentialist novel in the tradition of Dostoevski's *Notes from Under Underground*, Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, Henri Barbusse's *L'Enfer*, and Sartre's *La Nausee* (84).

A number of more recent critics have been more hostile, with Regenia Gagnier critiquing Rolfe's decadent writing for its reactionary political outlook and refusal to imagine the "other." Gagnier contrasts Rolfe with Wilde and other fin-de-siècle writers who, she claims, embraced progressive social and political aspirations.

One might just as easily argue that Rolfe repeatedly rendered *himself* as the “other,” as he demonstrated the refusal of others to imagine him. More radically, he resisted the imposition of a single, normative identity as a violation of creative protocol. Rolfe explained in a letter to a friend regarding the journalistic attack on him in Aberdeen, “Most people have only half developed their single personalities. That a man should split his into four and more; and should develop each separately and perfectly, was so abnormal that many normals failed to understand it. So when ‘false pretences’ and similar shibboleths were shrieked, they also took alarm and howled. But there were no false pretences” (qtd. in Symonds 49-50).

Self-consciously cantankerous, Rolfe remains a little-understood *monstre sacré* of the British Decadent Movement. His obsession with Latinate, dense, and exotic linguistic formulations represents a life-long desire to evoke a classical past that is inassimilable to contemporary life. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, Rolfe’s later fiction represents the successful adaptation of the preoccupations of late-Victorian decadents to a new modernist enterprise. This transmutation took the form of a love of male beauty and a heightened subjectivity, both of which are wedded to a marked sincerity of intention crucial to camp aesthetics. In his 1925 essay on Rolfe, Lawrence focuses directly on this issue of sincerity in Rolfe’s writing. “In *Hadrian the Seventh*, Frederick Rolfe falls in, head over heels, in deadly earnest,” writes Lawrence. “He reaches heights, or depths, of sublime ridiculousness. It is extraordinarily alive[. ...] It does not ‘date’ as do Huysmans’s books, or Wilde’s, or the rest of them” (239). Calling *Hadrian the Seventh* “a clear and definite book of our epoch,” Lawrence implies that turn-of-the-century writers must shake off their Yellowish allegiances. Yet with its striking formal experimentation, homoerotic rhapsodizing, and religious obsessiveness so characteristic of much of fin-de-siècle literature, Rolfe’s writing suggests otherwise.

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