



WILLIAM THOMAS HORTON (1864–1919)

Of all the strange and interesting artists who published in the fin-de-siècle's aesthetic magazines, William Thomas Horton is one of the most mysterious. *The Savoy* (1896) gave him his first break and included his illustrations in four of its eight issues. His contributions are among the most striking *The Savoy* ever published. Following the *Savoy* debut, various other journals, including *The Dome* (1897–1900), *Pick-Me-Up* (1888–1909), *The Academy* (1869–1916), and *The Green Sheaf* (1903–04) printed his work but failed to bring him lasting recognition. After 1904, he published relatively little and gradually slipped away into obscurity.

The paucity of scholarly attention Horton has received in the years since have not helped matters. There have been only two minor studies of the man. A very short biography appeared in *William Thomas Horton (1864-1919): A Selection of His Work with a Biographical Sketch*, which was published in small numbers by his friend Roger Ingpen about a decade after his death. In 1980, George Mills Harper published *W.B. Yeats and W.T. Horton: The Record of an Occult Friendship*. Most details of Horton's life are drawn from the *Biographical Sketch* and his correspondence with Yeats. He has been occasionally acknowledged by critics, but only fleetingly. Holbrook Jackson mentions him only once in his definitive work *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century*, but it is a note of praise: "The most notable ... [of the black-and-white symbolists] was W.T. Horton, who, with the

extraordinary economy of materials, the briefest of lines and the flattest masses of black, produced startling revelations of human types in the very few designs he published” (284).

Horton was born on June 27, 1864 in Brussels, where his father was working, and moved to Brighton with his family while still a child. He attended Brighton Grammar School, which, interestingly, Aubrey Beardsley also attended several years later. Although they were not schoolboy contemporaries, the two met in London shortly before Horton submitted his work to *The Savoy*. According to Ingpen, Horton “paid a visit to Beardsley whom he described as entirely unspoiled by his great success, and who gave him some words of encouragement at a time when he had hitherto obtained little encouragement elsewhere” (6). Horton apparently spoke at times “of the beauty of Beardsley’s line almost in despair” (6). The precocious Beardsley, nearly ten years younger than Horton, was art editor of the *Savoy* at age 23 before dying from tuberculosis aged just 25. Horton, meanwhile, did not start intensively studying art until he was 29 and did not begin illustrating professionally until he was 32.

When Horton left school, his first vocation was architecture. In 1887 he joined the Royal Academy Architectural School, although his studies were neither particularly successful nor satisfying. He exhibited only one work at the Royal Academy: a pen-and-ink design in 1890 for a theatre facade. “He said that he never obtained a prize or did anything but very average work” (Ingpen 2). Horton harboured literary ambitions and even sent a short story to Thomas Hardy while a student, but he nevertheless continued his studies and grudgingly found work at an architect’s office. In November 1893, Horton attempted to start a practice of his own but abandoned it after just a couple of months. It is at this point that he turned his back on architecture and deliberately started to pursue an artistic career. His first venture into arts and letters was *Whispers – A Magazine for Surrey Folk* (1893-?). Apparently, four numbers were produced (Finneran 191), with most of the content written and edited by Horton himself. Only the first issue is extant. A copy is held by the British Library but it is interesting mostly as a historical document counterpointing the enormous departure that Horton made with his illustrations for *The Savoy* and *The Green Sheaf*. There is nothing among the dry and

ordinary pages of *Whispers* that suggests the weird and unsettling images Horton would later produce.

Over the next three years Horton visited London frequently and came into contact with W.B. Yeats and a number of other poets and artists. At the time, alternative spirituality was becoming highly fashionable, especially in literary circles, as artists connected to the Decadent and Symbolist movements rebelled against the confines of traditional orthodoxy and sought out more exotic forms of expression. Occult societies flourished and Horton was entranced. He joined the Brotherhood of the New Life, a utopian mystical order started by Thomas Lake Harris, and discussed magical rituals and visions with Yeats. On Saturday March 21, 1896, Horton was initiated into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn with Yeats as his sponsor. He lasted a month. In late April, he wrote Yeats to announce that he could not continue with the Golden Dawn. Among other reasons, he felt his Christianity conflicted with the Egyptian-flavoured paganism pursued by the Order. Though his tenure with the Golden Dawn was short-lived, Horton was enthralled by mysticism for the rest of his life and remained close friends with Yeats.

The friendship was an especially important one because it led directly to Horton's *Savoy* work. From mid-1895 to February 1896 Yeats shared a flat with Arthur Symons, who was then putting together *The Savoy* for publisher Leonard Smithers. In a letter dated March 28, 1896 Horton wrote Yeats: "I must write & thank you most warmly for laying my drawings before Symons who has very kindly chosen 3 for the forthcoming *Savoy*" (Harper 139).

Published in the *Savoy's* second issue in April 1896, Horton's "Three Visions" are inspired by Bible quotations and created through minimal line work and a careful use of white space. Compared to the work of other 1890s illustrators, the drawings look simple, perhaps even naive, but his style is restrained and assured in its economy. Relying on the bold contrast of bare white figures against a heavy black background, Horton achieves an ominous atmosphere.

In May 1898 *The Dome* included a fairly sober cityscape by Horton in its fifth and final volume. Interestingly, this is placed in the “Architecture and Sculpture” section, not the “Drawings, Paintings and Engravings” section. That same year, E.J. Oldmeadow, the editor of *The Dome*, published Horton’s masterpiece, *A Book of Images*, through his Unicorn Press. The *Images* are a mixture of stark, lonely architectural drawings, and symbolist, visionary art. The book demonstrates a growing confidence, especially in his depictions of mystical subjects, as Horton successfully conjures his subjects from vast expanses of black and white. Horton’s bold curvilinear forms are unusual amongst his generation and show a skillful hand.

Although *The Savoy* folded after a year, the relationship between Smithers and Horton continued and resulted in a deluxe edition of Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Raven, The Pit, and The Pendulum* (1899), with seven illustrations and cover design by the artist. Horton opted to do black chalk drawings, which are not as successful as his usual pen line drawings. That year, he also illustrated the ghoulish front cover to Smithers’s edition of Knut Hamsun’s *Hunger*, translated into English by George Egerton.

Despite his fondness for black and white, in 1900 Horton illustrated a book of nursery rhymes in colour, *The Grig’s Book*, although the effect veers towards the unheimlich. He was an unusual choice for a children’s illustrator and the result is unsettling rather than warming.

After *Hunger* and *Poe*, he did no further work for Smithers and moved away from that world of 1890s decadence. In the early years of the new century he had several illustrations published in *The Occult Review* (1905–1950) and several published in *The Green Sheaf*, a magazine edited and published by Pamela Coleman Smith. Smith, a fascinating figure in her own right, also joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and was commissioned by fellow member A.E. Waite to illustrate the iconic Rider-Waite tarot deck. Smith also shared a friendship with W.B. Yeats, who encouraged her to start *The Green Sheaf*. It is likely that Yeats was partly to thank for Horton’s inclusion in her new journal. Besides the *Book of Images*, Horton also did illustrations for two other mystical books: another visionary text of his own, *The Way of the Soul, a Legend in Line*

and Verse (1910), and H. Rider Haggard's *The Mahatma and the Hare, a Dream Story* (1911).

The Way of the Soul was inspired by Amy Audrey Locke, an academic researcher who became Horton's partner and muse for the rest of his life. They lived together from around 1912 in a chaste relationship. Yeats would later include Horton in his dedication for *A Vision* and references both his membership in the Golden Dawn and his relationship with Locke: "A third who remained our fellow student but a short time – for some dream or vision warned him that our meat could not be his – lived through the strangest adventure of them all – Platonic love" (Harper 3).

In 1916, Locke died from acute mastoiditis, aged 35. Horton suffered a mental breakdown following her death and retreated even deeper into solitary mysticism. In 1918, he was hit by a car and further incapacitated. He died in obscurity the following year.

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Biography: Jon Crabb is a writer, editor, and designer. His books include *Graven Images: The Art of the Woodcut* (2017) and *Decadence: A Literary Anthology* (2016). For several years, he was Editor for British Library Publishing, where he was responsible for commissioning and editing illustrated titles.

Selected Works by W.T. Horton

"Ballade des Pendus." *The Savoy*, no. 6, October 1896, p. 60.

A Book of Images. Unicorn Press, 1898.

"Chateau de Garde." *The Green Sheaf*, no. 9, January 1904, p. 4.

"Christian Science" [letter]. *The Occult Review*, vol. 23, 1916, p. 51.

"A Cul-de-Lampe." *The Savoy*, no. 2, April 1896, p. 144.

"A Cul-de-Lampe." *The Savoy*, no. 4, August 1896, p. 86.

"The Definite" [poem]. *The Green Sheaf*, no. 8, December 1903, p. 14.

The Grig's Book. Moffat and Paige, 1900.

"Hatred, Malice, and All Uncharitableness." *Pick-Me-Up* vol. 21, no. 540, February 1899, p. 300.

Hunger, by Knut Hamsun, trans. by George T. Egerton, illustrated by W.T. Horton, Leonard Smithers, 1899.

“In lone splendour hung aloft the night.” *The Green Sheaf*, no. 6, October 1903, p. 11.

“La Tranquillita.” *The Green Sheaf*, no. 2, June 1903, p. 11.

The Mahatma and the Hare, a Dream Story, by H. Rider Haggard, illustrated by W.T. Horton, Longmas Green & Co., 1911.

“Mother Shipton” [letter]. *The Occult Review*, vol. 23, 1916, p. 280.

“Mr W. B. Yeats.” *The Academy*, vol. 57, no. 1418, July 1899, p. 28.

“Now more than ever seems it rich to die, / To cease upon the midnight with no pain.”
The Savoy, no. 7, November 1896, pp. 39–40.

The Raven, The Pit, and The Pendulum, by Edgar Allan Poe, illustrated by W.T. Horton, Leonard Smithers, 1899.

“re: The Apocalypse unsealed by John M Pryse” [letter]. *The Occult Review*, vol. 23, 1916, p. 167.

“Symbolist Visions.” *The Occult Review*, vol. 12, 1910, pp. 352–57.

“Three Visions.” *The Savoy*, no. 2, April 1896, p. 71.

Untitled. *The Green Sheaf*, no. 2, June 1903, p. 2.

“A Vignette.” *The Savoy*, no. 2, April 1896, pp. 139–43.

“A Vignette.” *The Savoy*, no. 4, August 1896, p. 85.

“Was Blake ever in Bedlam?” *The Occult Review*, vol. 16, 1912, pp. 266–69.

The Way of the Soul, a Legend in Line and Verse, William Rider & Son, n.d. [1910].

“What is Theophany?” [letter], *The Occult Review*, vol. 28, 1918, p. 172.

Whispers – A Magazine for Surrey Folk. Redhill Press, 1893–?.

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Finneran, Richard F., and George Mills Harper. “‘He loved strange things’: W.B. Yeats and William Thomas Horton.” *Yeats and the Occult*, ed. George Mills Harper. Macmillan Press, 1975, pp. 190–203.

Harper, George Mills. *W.B. Yeats and W.T. Horton: The Record of an Occult Friendship*, Macmillan Press, 1980.

Ingpen, Roger. *William Thomas Horton (1864–1919): A Selection of his Work with a Biographical Sketch*, Ingpen and Grant, n.d. [1929].

Jackson, Holbrook. *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century*, Grant Richards, 1913.