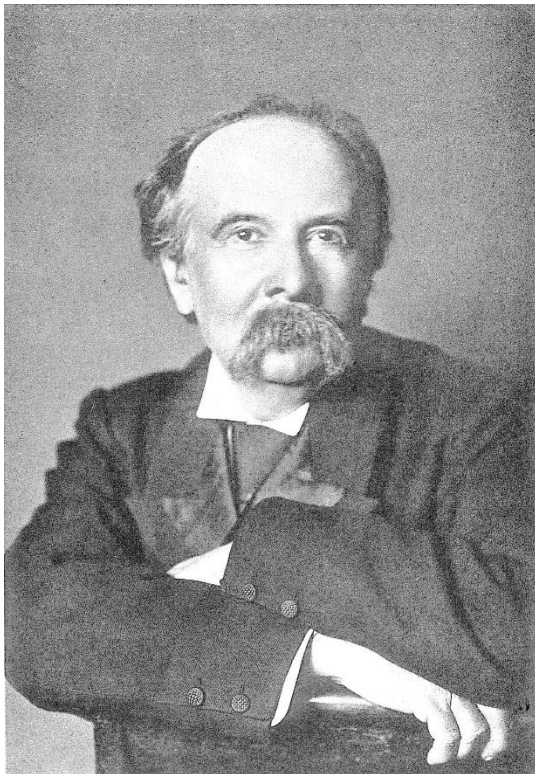




WALTER THEODORE WATTS-DUNTON (1832-1914)



*Theodore Watts-Dunton. Photograph, 1916, Frontispiece from *The Life and Letters of Theodore Watts-Dunton*. Edited by Thomas Hake and Arthur Compton-Rickett.*

The critic, novelist, and poet Walter Theodore Watts-Dunton (Watts until 1896, when he changed his name for legal reasons) was born on 12 October 1832 in St Ives, Huntingdon. From his father, a solicitor, he inherited both a strong interest in science and a profession, but his scientific pursuits and legal expertise were supplemented by a strong love of literature and a passion for nature that dated from his schooldays in Cambridge. He published his first articles in the *Cambridge Chronicle* while working in his father's office. Later, while practising as a solicitor in London, he made acquaintance with the poets Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Algernon Charles Swinburne, advising Rossetti over a stolen cheque and helping Swinburne extricate himself from a potential blackmail at the hands of his

unscrupulous publisher John Camden Hotten. Watts's enthusiasm for art and literature and his lively conversational manner, together with his warmth and loyalty, made him valuable as a friend. In 1879, he famously prevented Swinburne's early demise from

alcoholism by removing him from his London lodgings to Putney. Later the pair moved into No. 2 “The Pines,” where Watts effectively assumed guardianship of the poet until his death in 1909. Watts was also one of the few people that Rossetti would see during his last reclusive years.

But Watts was more than just a friend to poets. After his remove to London in the early 1870s, he began to write journalistic articles on literature, becoming the leading critic on poetry for the *Examiner* and then, from 1876, the *Athenæum*. His articles were educative for general readers but were also valued by poets such as Robert Browning and James Russell Lowell. A major personality in the London literary scene, Watts was an influential and supportive figure for many aspirant poets and writers. His approval was seen as highly desirable; yet because *Athenæum* reviews were unsigned, some writers, as he regretfully noted, blamed him for harsh evaluations that he had not in fact written.

Watts-Dunton’s prominence as a critic is now hardly recognised, partly owing to the fact that he failed to bring out collections of his essays during his heyday. Procrastination and a tendency to spread himself too thinly because of his many interests and commitments militated against the production of books. In his own time he was celebrated for the entry on “Poetry” that he contributed to the ninth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1885), still in use in the eleventh edition of 1911. Another much-admired piece was “The Renaissance of Wonder in Poetry,” the opening entry of the third volume of *Chambers’s Cyclopædia of English Literature* (1903). These two entries were eventually collected and published in book form two years after Watts-Dunton’s death but, by that time, they had lost their moment and looked rather dated.

In 1897, John Lane published a long-awaited and well-received collection of poems by Watts-Dunton, *The Coming of Love*, which had appeared piecemeal in the *Athenæum* from 1882 onwards. The most important poems in this collection tell the ill-fated story of a young upper-class poet and sailor, Percy Aylwin, and his love for a gypsy girl, Rhona Boswell. (As a young man, Watts had learnt Romany and developed an intense interest in British gypsy life.) The following year, Watts-Dunton published a novel, *Aylwin*, a

prequel or parallel narrative to *The Coming of Love*, in which Percy's cousin, the wealthy and well-born Henry Aylwin, is cruelly separated from his childhood sweetheart Winifred Wynne and embarks on a quest to find her, aided by his close friend, the gypsy girl Sinfi Lovell. The novel, which Watts-Dunton had been working on for over twenty-five years, became the publishing sensation of 1898 and was reviewed admiringly in both Britain and on the continent. Although it had gone into twenty-six editions by 1914 and was still available in a World Classics reprint in 1950, the novel is today virtually unknown though well worth reading for its strange blend of sensation fiction, gypsy lore, the occult, mesmerism, and Romanticism.

Many noted figures visited Swinburne and Watts-Dunton's Putney retreat including Max Beerbohm, who left a humorous account of his visit in his essay "No. 2 The Pines," published in *And Even Now* (1920). At the age of seventy-three, after a long bachelorhood, Watts-Dunton married the twenty-nine-year-old Clara Reich in 1905, having first met her when she was a school girl of sixteen. She joined the ménage at "The Pines" and her biographical study, published in 1922 (some years after her husband's death), paints an affectionate, though some might say rather banal, picture of the daily routines of the Swinburne-Watts-Dunton household. Her book deliberately counters the impression given in Edmund Gosse's 1917 biography of Swinburne that Watts-Dunton deprived the poet of his freedom and diminished his creativity. Rumours that the Watts-Dunton union was unhappy or merely a marriage of convenience were also firmly contradicted by his widow. A chapter contributed by her to Watts-Dunton's biography by Thomas Hake and Arthur Compton-Rickett gives ample testimony of the couple's mutual devotion.

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