

# A homophile priest and poet

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## A Homophile Priest and Poet

The grave life and example of Gerard Manley Hopkins (1845—1889) an Oxford aesthete who became an exemplary priest in the Jesuit Order without repressing the strong attraction which he felt for beauty in his own sex, is worthy of consideration and admiration — perhaps even of emulation. A photograph taken in 1863 shows him to have been a very lovely youth. A description by a fellow Jesuit of his appearance as a young man said that «though he *appeared* to be effeminate he was certainly *not* that. He had a certain natural grace of carriage that was pleasing, but was quite unconscious of the fact, and he had a *strong manly will* of his own» (Life of G. M. H. by Eleanor Ruggles, p. 88, John Lane).

At Oxford, before becoming a Catholic, he met Robert Bridges «striking looking, tall, splendidly built, with swarthy skin and heavy dark hair». Brusque in manner and diffident by nature he contracted with Hopkins a friendship which survived all misunderstandings and preserved for posterity the latter's matchless poetry. Bridges could be John-Bullish, and Hopkins pedantic, but beneath the crust of mutual imperfections there was «the dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend for friend» of which Walt Whitman sung. Hopkins to the bewilderment of the non-Catholic and rather un-catholic Bridges entered the Jesuit noviciate. Side by side with very different types — the «silent awkward Daniel Considine», who was later to make his mark as a leader of souls, and Henry Schömburg Kerr, the «wiskered novice» who had been a commander in the British Navy, he was formed in the discipline of a great order.

Here and there we see in his Note Books an occasioned record of his attractions. Once he met a stableman whose kindness touched his heart. Once, on a steamboat cruise he noticed «a good-looking young man». Later on his sensitiveness to male beauty was to find it's flowering in his poetry. He kept in touch with the faithful Bridges who, not unnaturally, was chary of a possible censored correspondence, but finally intrusted to Hopkins a poem «The Gift of Love» which was to kindle a flame of emulation. Hopkins had burnt his youthful poems when he became a Jesuit, and wrote nothing of importance during his formative years. After his ordination to the priesthood his Muse revived, and he sent his new poems to Bridges. At Mount St. Marys College the love of brother for younger brother was immortalized. At Oxford his affection for two Italian lads produced «The handsome heart» with it's appraisal of «More than handsome face». At Cowley Barracks he admired «limber liquid youth . . . slips of soldiery . . . fresh youth fretted in a bloomful».

From such idyls he was sent by Jesuit obedience to the slums of Manchester and Liverpool. In sordid surroundings he wept for the death of a blacksmith, a «mould of man, big-boned and hardy handsome». At Liverpool his Note Book contrasts the «base and bespotted figures» of a sallow crowd with «fine and manly» sailors from Norway. Finally — and hardest of all obediences for a sensitive Englishman — he was sent to Ireland. Yet he found that even in Dublin he could «kind love both

give and get». Increasingly he realized that his mind was more like that of Walt Withman than any other's living — — though he thought him «a very great scoundrel»!

Bridges thought that the «Hyde» of Stevenson's «Jekyll and Hyde» was overdrawn. «You are wrong» said honest Hopkins «my Hyde is worse»!

As Stephen Spender (Horizon, 1940) has well said: «He was ever at war with one side of his personality but he did not reject and condemn the whole of life on the strength of it as Housman did — — one sees the superiority of the Catholic environment to the Protestant and Puritan. In Hopkins there is continual struggle . . . not blank refusal and enforced silence. Housman had what is called «integrity», Hopkins had honesty and «audacity». His poetry is that of *a man who struggles with life and illuminates life more and more in the process.*»

Through years of endeavour his reputation was unscathed and his conscious at peace. When, in the prime of life, he fell a victim to typhoid in Dublin, he said with his last breath: «I am so happy». Thirty years later the fraternal piety of Bridges revealed to the literary world an unknown poet — and to the homophile world the example of a splendid sublimation.

BEUNO.

## Some Thoughts on Platen

The German poet Platen, more restless than ever, was at Naples for the last time in July 1835. On this occasion the town looked different; everybody was scared, since an epidemic of cholera was spreading southward and might soon be at the city gates. People fled in all directions, and Platen followed their example. In September he crossed over to Palermo, a familiar spot; there, on the 11th of November, took root at Syracuse surrounded by admirers and friends like Landolina — took root; not for long. He fell ill on the 23rd of the same month of some gastric or intestinal trouble beginning with a colic, and died after twelve days' suffering in spite of all that medical skill and Landolina's devotion could suggest. It may be true, as has been hinted, that his end was hastened by some violent and pernicious drug which he insisted on taking.

They buried him in his garden. It says something for the esteem in which the Lutheran was held that his funeral was attended by enormous numbers of the populace and by the entire clergy of Syracuse, with the archbishop at their head. There he lies, and his shade in Elysium may draw contentment from the hazard which brought him, the 'last of the Platonists', to rest under a blue sky, among olives and vines, and in soil once trodden by the Master himself.

It cannot be less than fifty-seven years since I read Platen's poems (the diaries and so forth were consulted at a later date). This happened at the gymnasium of Karlsruhe, where they gave us a good dose of him. Our professor was not enthusiastic about this poet. Maybe he disapproved