



THEODORE WRATISLAW (1871-1933)



Theodore Wratishaw. Photograph, c. 1914, *The Poets of the Shires: Warwickshire Poets*, edited by Charles Henry Poole.

“Is it really Wratishaw?” John Betjeman asked in “On Seeing an Old Poet in the Café Royal” (61). It was not Wratishaw, apparently; it was Arthur Symons. But the confusion is appropriate: Theodore Wratishaw remains an elusive figure, drifting in and out of the 1890s as though it were not altogether clear whether he was a fictional character – he was indeed a source of inspiration for the title character of Max Beerbohm’s short story “Enoch Soames” (1916) – or a historical personage.

Theodore William Graf Wratishaw was born at Rugby, Warwickshire, on 21 April 1871. “Graf” is the German title of Count to which his grandfather, William Ferdinand Wratishaw, laid claim, though it is uncertain whether he was justified in doing so. Theodore was the first born of a fourth generation of Wratishaws in Rugby. By this time, they had become one of the pre-eminent families in the town on account of the solicitors practice first established by William Ferdinand in the early nineteenth century and developed by Theodore’s father. The latter also perpetuated the family’s commitment to Liberal politics and evangelical Christianity.

Wratislaw was educated at Rugby School, where his great-grandfather had been a Master. In 1888 he left school to take up a position in his father's office with a view to qualifying as a solicitor himself. At odds with his inheritance, however, Wratislaw harboured literary ambitions: first and foremost under the influence of Algernon Swinburne, he wondered whether he might become a poet. To this end, in 1892 two self-financed collections – *Love's Memorial* and *Some Verses* – were published locally with George Over in editions of 35 copies each. During this period, the poet was encouraged by Norman Gale, also resident at Rugby, with whom he would acrimoniously break in due course. According to George Ives, it is also the time when Wratislaw hovered at the edge of the group of homosexual Oxford undergraduates – part of what came to be known as the Uranian poets – that variously published in *The Spirit Lamp* (1892-93) and *The Chameleon* (1894).

Wratislaw moved to London in 1893, ostensibly with the purpose of passing his final law examinations before returning to the family firm, but most likely in the hope of establishing himself as a metropolitan *homme de lettres*. In the latter aim he enjoyed the patronage of Charles Kains Jackson, with whom he had most likely come into contact via the Oxford Uranians. As editor of *The Artist and Journal of Home Culture* (1880-1902) from 1888 to 1894, Kains Jackson published some of Wratislaw's poems, including the homoerotic "To a Sicilian Boy" (August 1893). He also provided an outlet for Wratislaw's literary journalism, publishing a series of his forthright articles on fellow poets, as well as two pieces on Aubrey Beardsley. The earlier of these, published in September 1893, was the first to discuss Beardsley's work in relation to decadence. In time Wratislaw became acquainted with Beardsley and a number of other notable figures, amongst them Max Beerbohm, Lord Alfred Douglas, Ernest Dowson, and Arthur Symons. Other contacts and sources of patronage were Kains Jackson's associate Gleeson White, who published Wratislaw's article "The Photographic Salon at the Dudley Gallery" in *The Studio* (1893-1964), and the Rev. Stewart Headlam, who published a number of his poems in *The Church Reformer* (1882-95). In September 1893, Wratislaw also spent a weekend as Oscar Wilde's guest at Goring-on-Thames.

At the close of 1893, his collection of poetry, *Caprices*, appeared with an art-nouveau cover designed by Gleeson White. Like Wratislaw's *Love's Memorial*, this collection had been rejected by John Lane, thanks to a negative reader's report by Richard Le Gallienne, before being published by Gay & Bird. Wratislaw originally intended to include "To A Sicilian Boy" in the volume, though at the last minute he thought better of it. The book received an excellent notice in Kains Jackson's *The Artist*, written by his friend, Charles Hiatt, but for the most part the critical tide ran contrariwise.

Having passed his final law examinations in November 1893, Wratislaw returned to Rugby, yet by the following autumn he was back in the capital and for the first and last time appeared in *The Yellow Book*. "To Salomé at St James's" was published in Volume 3, October 1894, alongside the work of a number of other young decadents. Once again, the reviews were hardly generous. In the *Pall Mall Gazette*, "all, or nearly all" of the contributors were charged with "infantile blasphemy," but Wratislaw was singled out for a special dose of opprobrium ("Brazen").

In 1895 Wratislaw's verse play, *The Pity of Love*, appeared through Swann Sonnenschein. Thanks in no small part to the advocacy of George H. Ellwanger, to whom he had been introduced by Gleeson White, Wratislaw also published a couple of poems in *The Chap-Book* (1894-98), an American little magazine published by Stone and Kimball in Massachusetts. Still he found it impossible to live by his pen alone. In August 1895 he entered the Civil Service, specifically the Estates Duty Office at Somerset House, London. In due course, he found favour with Leonard Smithers, who published some of his works in *The Savoy* (1896), including his only published piece of fiction. In May 1896 Smithers also published Wratislaw's final and most substantial poetic statement, *Orchids*. It proved a high-water mark: henceforth Wratislaw ceased to publish as a poet, save for "Tintagel," which appeared in *Literature* (1897-1902), the predecessor to the *Times Literary Supplement*, in April 1899. That said, he did publish *Algernon Charles Swinburne: A Study* in Greening's short-lived series "English Writers of Today." During his lifetime this was the literary work for which Wratislaw was best known.

Wratislaw married three times. His first wife, Sarah Esther Caroline Harris (b. 1875), was a Jewish Londoner who as a child had emigrated to Cape Town, returning to Britain via Milan as a trained opera singer by 1897. They married in 1899, but Sara died of tuberculosis in 1901, aged 26. In April 1908 he married Theodora Russell (née Bankes) (b. 1875), but they divorced in 1912. In July 1914, Wratislaw was declared a bankrupt, but his luck turned at the end of this year when he met Ada Ross (b. 1878), a prosperous London couturier. They married in May 1915. The marriage endured, insulating Wratislaw from a further humiliation: disinheritance by his father, with whom he seems to have shared a turbulent relationship throughout his adult life.

Owing to the ill health that had dogged him for a decade or more, Wratislaw retired from the Estates Duty Office in 1930. He began but did not complete a memoir of the 'nineties, *Salad Days*, including the recollections of his weekend with Wilde that were published in 1979 (*Oscar Wilde*). Following Wratislaw's death in September 1933, John Gawsworth edited Ada's memoriam to her husband, *Selected Poems of Theodore Wratislaw*. In an obituary notice, his long-time friend, Susan Watt, remembered "one of the eager lads of the nineties, a member of that 'tuneful choir in full song'" (Sheppard, 215).

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D.J. Sheppard is Senior Academic Mentor and teacher of philosophy at Oakham School, Rutland. He is the author of *Plato's Republic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009) and *Theodore Wratislaw: Fragments of a Life* (High Wycombe: Rivendale, 2017).

Selected Publications by Theodore Wratislaw

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