

The Rattigan

The Newsletter of
The Terence Rattigan Society

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Version

A Journey Together to RAF High Wycombe

Some forty members of the Terence Rattigan Society gathered at RAF High Wycombe Officers' Mess on 29 September to celebrate the playwright's wartime RAF service and watch one of the films he scripted for the RAF Film Production Unit.

Terence Rattigan served in the RAF as a Coastal Command Air Gunnery Leader during WW2. He drew on his experiences to write his seminal wartime play about Bomber Command, *Flare Path*, recently revived to great acclaim in the West End. Whilst still in uniform, he also penned the film adaptation, *The Way to the Stars*, filmed at RAF Catterick. Subsequently, he was co-opted onto the RAF Film production Unit where he wrote the screenplay of *Journey Together*, a recruiting vehicle for multi-engine crews and featuring a host of British actors then serving in the RAF.

This rarely seen film was introduced at the special screening by one of Rattigan's biographers and Society Vice-President, Michael Darlow, himself a former RAF National Serviceman. Michael was also the director of the acclaimed 1989 BBC drama *Bomber Harris*, starring John Thaw in the title role. The occasion was an opportunity to reunite Michael with actor, historian and former RAF pilot Robert Hardy, who starred in the drama in one of his many portrayals of wartime Prime Minister, Winston



A report by Group Captain Clive Montellier

seen here with two of our VPs and guest Robert Hardy at RAF High Wycombe. Photo: Elaine Sherwood



Churchill, and who took time out from a very busy schedule to join the Society event.

Together with members of the Society committee, Robert and Michael visited Air Chief Marshal Harris's former office (pictured above) now restored to its wartime configuration by a team from RAF High Wycombe and containing a number of original items of furniture and fittings.

In his introduction to the film, Michael poignantly commented, "It's a sobering thought that had Rattigan been posted to Bomber, rather than Coastal, Command, he might have been one of the 55,000 lost aircrew commemorated on the memorial unveiled this year, depriving us of some of the finest works in 20th century English theatre. We are fortunate that he was able to use his experiences to bring the world of wartime flying to life for the British public".

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The Terence Rattigan Society

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Vice-Presidents: Michael Darlow, Greta Scacchi, David Suchet CBE, Geoffrey Wansell



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INTRODUCING

...our Vice-President Geoffrey Wansell

When asked to sum up his career to date, Geoffrey suggests “Lots of books and lots of hackery”. This is a typically self-deprecating phrase: he has worked as a journalist and feature writer, both full-time and freelance, for *The Times Educational Supplement*, *The Times* itself, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Observer*, *The Independent*, *The Sunday Express* and the *Daily Mail*. Oh, and the *Evening Standard* too. He seems not to have enjoyed writing for *The Guardian*, though, only one piece by him having appeared in those august pages.



Apart from his acclaimed biography of Rattigan, which was shortlisted for the Whitbread prize in 1995 and is now re-issued in paperback by Oberon Books, he has written biographies of Cary Grant (twice), Sir James Goldsmith and, in an interesting departure, two notorious murderers, Frederick West and, most recently, Levi Bellfield, who murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler. It must be a strange position to be in, to watch every day of a trial at the Old Bailey, and even converse with the accused, who wants to make sure the biographer gets the story right.

Geoffrey has just completed his second history of the Garrick Club, of which he is a life member—his first history, written some ten years ago, having been revised, updated and enhanced by much new material. It is to be published next year, also by Oberon Books. His current project is his first as a ‘ghost’, not a task he

would lightly undertake—unless the author he is ‘ghosting’ happens to be a long-standing friend. This was indeed the case here, since the book is entitled *Poirot and Me* and is, of course, the story behind our Vice-President David Suchet’s extraordinary success with Agatha Christie’s famous Belgian detective.

Geoffrey first became aware of Rattigan’s plays in his early teens. His father was an admirer of the fashionable playwright, but when the Royal Court revolution took place, Geoffrey was in favour of John Osborne and the new young playwrights, and found himself arguing passionately with his father about the merits of Rattigan’s work. It was only after his father died very suddenly that he came to realise just how wrong he had been, and how right his father had been. It was therefore partly for his father’s sake that he wanted to write a biography that would help to rehabilitate Rattigan as a master dramatist.

“That’s why the Terence Rattigan Society is so important,” says Geoffrey; “It has a big role to play in keeping his reputation alive, and that’s why I’m so delighted that it has come into being.”


He recalls talking about Rattigan to John Osborne, who was, perhaps surprisingly, very upset at the way Rattigan had been treated by the critics. Wouldn’t it be deliciously ironic if Osborne were still with us, to lead the campaign for a Rattigan Theatre? 

Photo Caption Competition

It is the Editor’s sad duty to report that the caption competition in the last issue has not been won, and that we have a ‘rollover’ prize for next time. **Two** glasses of champagne, therefore, to the reader who first correctly identifies the actor walking next to Edward G Robinson in the film poster on the front page. Yes, it’s a grainy picture, but you can do it!

The Rattigan Vault

by Michael Gaunt



Kensal Green, the General Cemetery of All Saints, opened its seventy-two acres, including seven acres reserved for Dissenters, in 1833. It was the first of the seven great joint-stock cemeteries that encircle London: the others are at Norwood, Highgate, Nunhead, Abney Park, Brompton and Tower Hamlets.

Earlier this year Sir Donald Sinden in his foreword to a book published by the Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery comments '*We usually know where actors were born and where they died, but it is often difficult to find where they are buried*'. This is true not just of actors and even when the cemetery is known many will be aware that it can be almost impossible to locate an actual grave site amongst a multitude of weathered and often overgrown memorials. The book is called *Their Exits* and it has been researched and written by Henry Vivian-Neal. It has an intriguing sub-title – *A Select Alphabetical and Biographical List of Theatrical, Musical and Equestrian Performers and Literary Figures of Note Buried, Cremated or Commemorated at the Cemetery of All Saints at Kensal Green*. This book may provide some answers to the difficulty mentioned in Sir Donald's foreword.

On the west side of the cemetery is Oxford Avenue and in this section '*a large white marble cross with marble trellis work surround*' can be noticed: it is refer-

enced as follows—40098/181/2—and it marks the site of a family vault. All the graves in the cemetery have been numbered sequentially and grave number 40098 belongs to the Rattigans. The cemetery is divided into numbered squares and the Rattigan vault is situated in square number 181. The '2' in the reference number refers to the row in which the grave is situated and so the 'white marble cross' can be located in the second row of graves in plot 181. Happily, a map can be purchased at the cemetery office.

Readers will know Sir Terence Rattigan died in Bermuda in 1977 and that he was cremated in Canada. His ashes were brought back to England by his friend Pegs French and deposited in the vault containing the remains of his mother, father and brother. The name of this great 20th century playwright has not been inscribed on the memorial stone.

Within the cemetery are buried famous, and not so famous, men and women who worked in and for the theatrical profession in the past two hundred years. Names that resonate are those of playwrights Harold Pinter, Simon Gray and Christopher Logue, while 19th century memorials are to be found for James Albery, Leopold Lewis, and Frederick Reynolds in Catacomb B. Memorials for actors, on which some names are faint and some illegible, are headed by Edmund Kean's rival, the great William Charles Macready (lying with his family members in Catacomb B under the Anglican Chapel), Isabella Glyn, Charles and Fanny Kemble, John Liston, Charles James Mathews, John Laurence Toole, Madame Vestris and Lewis Waller. More recently the names of Geoffrey Hutchings, Wilfred Lawson and Anna Massey have been added to the assembly. At Kensal Green Sir Terence Rattigan is in good company.




Further reading:

Their Exits by Henry Vivian-Neal, published by The Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery, 2012 (See page 171)

Terence Rattigan by Geoffrey Wansell, originally published by Fourth Estate Ltd, 1995 (See page 397)

Michael Gaunt is Vice-Chairman of the Society for Theatre Research.

RAF High Wycombe, continued from p1

It was a great privilege to be able to bring together such key figures from the world of film and drama to assist the Society in celebrating a great English playwright who, like millions of others, donned uniform to serve his country in wartime. To be able to do so in the surroundings of the former Bomber Command HQ mess added a resonance to the occasion that our members felt genuinely moving. 

Clive Montellier is the Society's Secretary and organiser of this event.

Rattigan's Versions

by Simon Jenner

This roadkill view of the world –
fresh pressed flesh into the pot
I never count in the adventures
of my stomach. These kitchen sinkers

should try fresh tail gunner. They tried me
but I was long marinated *entre deux guerres*
pickled to my 0.5 Browning versions.
Now these war children evacuees from taste

miss-aim for me. All's blurted,
scatters to anger's great coagulant.
I saw tragedy's perfect arc punch tracer.
In icy trajectories I fell to my own.

Piffle. I saw tragoidia as goat song too:
jetted test pilots out of the dead and back.
I mean laughter, inexorable as plot,
to twist monosyllables with tears.


Devastate with tact. In my world whispers kill.
Not jewelled precision, just craft: a cuff links' flash
at dawn when your young lover deserts you.
Silence haunts hangings more than tenements.

Pauses. Act Two positions. Or the call
to fray your eyebrows before the half.
The played look worth three monologues.
That committed position on tears.

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Simon Jenner's collections include 'About Bloody
Time' (2007) and 'Wrong Evenings' (2011), both
published by Waterloo Press.

Footnote

In his introduction to the screening of *Journey Together* (see page 1), Michael Darlow pointed out that TR was in fact christened Terence Mervyn Rattigan, despite the absence of a middle name on his birth certificate, and that any notions of his having invented the extra name for himself later were fanciful. A pity perhaps, as it's so much more fun to speculate about these things! 

Spanish Grange, TR's
last home in Bermuda



Dates for your diary

On **Saturday 19 January 2013**, the Society has the opportunity to enjoy a very convivial lunch hosted by Society member and legendary restaurateur **Elena Salvoni** (born 1920), whose regular customers have included many theatrical luminaries including Rattigan himself. She now has occasional 'Elena's Lunches' at Little Italy in Frith Street, Soho. This one is not to be missed. A flyer is enclosed with this issue. Book your New Year treat now!

The Tower Theatre Company (amateur) is performing **The Deep Blue Sea** in March next year at the Bridewell Theatre, off Fleet Street. The Society hopes to make a block booking of tickets, costing £10 each – a saving of £4 on the door price – for the evening of **Wednesday 27 March**. A Society supper will also be arranged. Details to follow in the New Year.

Following the success of the Thea Sharrock Masterclass, Lizzie Donnelly has arranged a second Masterclass evening, to take place at Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance on **Wednesday 10 April**. The guest director will be **Adrian Brown** and he will work with actors on scenes from Rattigan's plays in front of an audience of Society members and students. More details and booking form to follow in due course.

The second **Annual Birthday Dinner** will be held on **Friday 7 June 2013** at the RAF Club in Piccadilly at 7 for 7.30 pm, with a distinguished guest speaker. More details in the next issue.

Anyone interested in joining the Society should contact the Membership Secretary, Diana Scotney, on 01462 623941 or at dianascotney@virginmedia.co.uk. We are always keen to hear from potential new members.

Members are encouraged to submit news, views, letters, articles or anecdotes to this newsletter. Please contact the editor via email (gc@gilescotney.com). The deadline for the next edition is Saturday 19 January.

Less Than Kind again

Less Than Kind, the unknown play by TR, which many members saw in Cambridge in March, has now gone up in the world. A new tour of major provincial theatres is planned to begin in April 2013, with the possibility of its being brought to the West End. Michael Darlow found this play in the Rattigan archive, and recognised it as the first draft for what became *Love In Idleness* after it had been disembowelled and prettified by its first interpreters, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. Very much a first draft, i.e. too long and too discursive, this *comédie larmoyante* was pulled together by Adrian Brown, who restored the author's own original focus—the struggle between youth and maturity, between forward political thinking and conservatism—while keeping the humour and the pain beneath the surface for which TR is so justly admired. 