

To Norman Barrett

King among men

who is entirely responsible for this effort.

M.G. School

Gr. H. P.

Sing - Song

M. H. H. H. H. H.

Henry Platt

Sept 15

I

Justification

Gentlemen of the machine gun class

You see before you Sirs a silly ass

Who for some thirteen years or so

Has served his country to his country's woe.

An ass may miss a lot, I grant you, but

He can't miss everything with both eyes shut.

So gentlemen not on the plea of sense

But merely of a long experience—

How long! Ye gods! You sirs I know it well

Have come out here to something worse than hell

Still this you have escaped, this one small thing

The dreary treadmill of peace soldiering:

The same old wheezes, same old drill parade

The same old lectures, same old comments made

Year after year the deadly dull routine

That's needful to produce a war machine

I ask your kind permission to recite

The introduction to our show to-night.

‘Gentlemen of the Machine Gun Class’

[VERSES FROM A SING-SONG ON THE WESTERN FRONT, SEPTEMBER 1915]

In 2012 *The Irish Sword* published two diaries of the Eton-educated soldier, Major Bryan Ricco Cooper (1884-1930), of Markree, Co. Sligo, a literary man, prominent in public life in Ireland.¹ The diaries were made available for publication by his grandson, Captain Edward Cooper, who is a member of the Society. Captain Cooper has since come across another item of interest among his grandfather's papers. This is a folded two-sheet leaflet, 13.5 cm x 21 cm (approx.



5¼" x 8¾") containing four printed pages inside a cover bound with a brown ribbon. Produced (it is assumed) in France, on good-quality paper, the item contains verses that were declaimed at a valedictory sing-song by officers who had participated in a machine gun course held near St. Omer, the British G.H.Q. on the Western Front. The initial verse, the work of Henry Platt [left], is reproduced opposite; and the remaining verses below. That these able amateur poets were being trained to operate machine guns is one of the arresting realisations that are characteristic of the Great War. The gentle grace of the skilful versifiers is in every way at odds with the world of mechanised carnage described by Henry Platt as ‘something worse than hell’.

The date September 1915 is written on the cover of the leaflet.² Bryan Cooper, who was then on Lemnos, having been evacuated from Gallipoli, was not on the machine gun course and did not serve in France. The likelihood is that the handsomely printed leaflet found its way into his papers because it was sent to him by a school-friend from Eton days, putatively Henry Evelyn Arthur Platt (1884-1916),³ whose name appears in manuscript on the cover, where he is identified as the author of the first verse. Cooper and Platt were exact

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¹ Cooper was M.P. for South County Dublin in 1910, and a member of the Dáil from 1923 until his death. The diaries, one from 1914, the other kept at Gallipoli when serving with the 5th Battalion of the Connaught Rangers, were printed in *Ir. Sword*, xxviii (No. 113: Summer 2012), pp 303-18.

² The machine gun course was probably one that concluded on 5 October 1915: fn. 6, *infra*.

³ See: William Bridge, *Captain Henry Evelyn Arthur Platt: Diaries and Letters of a First World War Officer* (The author: 2012; ISBN 9781480295001; <http://www.stanwardine.com>).

On Sincere Praise

Sirs, I have noted in these latter days
We rather have to justify our praise
For if we praise we're greeted with surprise
We're thought much sounder if we criticise
Adversely. As it's not my wish to curse
Or damn or call my fellows fools or worse
I ask your kind permission to digress
To justify my praising more or less
To state the case for that strange breed of cuss
Known as the 'Pleasant People' 'One of Us.'

The surly brute who grumbles in his beer
You may not like him but "he is sincere"
Such is your comment: if a man's polite
You, most of you, would write him down a s-well quite:
If a man's dead and some one says "The sod"
You'd think that comment just a trifle odd
But if he's living, some one says "The hound"
'A trifle harsh' you'd think 'but very sound.'
I cannot see it; if a fellow's dead
It cannot hurt him much whatever's said
But if he's living surely then it may: so
If he's done well, then *why on earth not say so*.
The surly brute the bully and the cad
He's not done well out here: he's done damn bad:
The poor weak fool men thought so insincere
Who says "yes please"—he's not done bad out here:
He may not push himself, its not his line
But when our chance comes to us, yours and mine
I think the man we'd choose to pull us thro'
Might be this one we so despised.

Because I praise then deem it not absurd
I mean it, yes I mean it every word.

The M.G. School

Gentlemen, *re* this course we've lately done
Its good its useful and—its rather fun:
Seven is an early start 'twere better eight
But then I always liked to get up late
Besides its good for us that morning run
Its good to watch the Brigadier 'MOUNT GUN.'

The very points which we so long have sought
Vainly to have explained, we have been taught
Not empty theory this but sound good sense
The hard won teaching of experience
Gained in this war, and how a fight is won
Or lost by handling of the Maxim gun—

'What shall we do with it' was once the cry
'In Africa it always let us in' they sigh
But now our leaders sing another strain
'How can we do without it' they complain.
The Cinderella arm that blushed unseen
Now claims her own the deadly battle queen—

No dry-dust facts lunch somnolent imbibed
But things that happened graphically described.
Bromides take note, read, mark and learn! but—Ah well
We can't all lecture like our Captain D—:
And then there's one a tiger for the work
Irish he is, his name—Lieut B—

He answers anyone however slim
He gets things done, he has a way with him.
Machine Gun School instructors of all ranks
For all you've taught us our sincerest thanks.

Our entertainers! just a word of praise
To those staunch fellows: SMILEY he who plays
Our priceless BOND, our peerless MARGETSON
Enough! for they shall prove themselves anon.

Ave
Atque
Vale

IV

Gentlemen all! here's what I lately read
"Our Officers are beardless boys, the old ones dead"
Isn't it awful? Bah! the silly rot
The empty drivel of a drunken sot
We'd have more sense than this poor donkey bray
Besides who wants a beard anyway?

I bought a horse once with a great big head
"Lonely without a cart" a kind friend said:
But when they saw him jump "O damn his head
What price £250 for that quadruped?"
With horses so with men, not head—or tail
Or chest, not even *beard* shall aught avail:
NO none of these, but by a thing apart
Shall we win thro' at last—a willing heart.
If we're 'reduced' to fellows such as you
All I can say I think that we shall do.

In all my life the greatest honor yet
Is to have been with you the pals I've met:
When we shake hands at parting Oh my friends
Surely this war shall make us some amends:
Peace welds a handshake to a friendship fond
But ours shall surely be a stronger bond.

Boys, you can feel the thought I would express
Words fail me but I mean it none the less
I will obey that phrase to "stop yer buck"
Safe home to all of you, the best of luck.

The end.

contemporaries at Eton and shared literary interests.⁴ Platt's father was a manufacturer of textile machinery in Oldham;⁵ but his mother came from Ireland, where her family, an army one, had land on the Blackwater in north Cork. Platt's maternal grandfather, Lieut.-Colonel Hodder Roberts of Renny, near Castletownroche, was a soldier. As a younger son, Platt was in a position to prefer the army to the family firm; and, having passed through Sandhurst, he was commissioned into the 19th Hussars in 1903. In his elegant introductory verse (reproduced opposite p. 361), he writes as a soldier who had served his country for thirteen years. He complains of 'the dreary treadmill of peace soldiering'.

When the machine gun course was over, Platt applied for a transfer to the Coldstream Guards.⁶ On 15 May of the following year, while serving with the 2nd Company of the 1st Battalion of the Coldstreams, he was killed in action at Ypres. The *Eton College Chronicle* of 3 June 1916, in announcing his death, alludes to his character as a writer 'who loved the good plain English phrase':

The war cloud hangs heavy over Eton. On entering the precincts of the Upper School there is a Roll of Honour (*Etona Non Immemor*) on Chapel wall of Eton's sons who have made the great surrender in the war. It now reaches 600 names or thereabouts, and there is now to be added Captain Henry Evelyn Arthur Platt, Coldstream Guards whose anonymous lines only the other week in the College Chronicle attracted attention. They were addressed to a soldier:

Say not of him 'he left this vale of tears,'
Who loved the good plain English phrase
 'He died,'
Nor state 'he nobly lived (or otherwise),
Failed or succeeded' – friend, just say
 'He tried'.

This verse that Platt had contributed anonymously to the *Eton College Chronicle* became the epitaph on his memorial in the Parish Church at Brompton.

The dedication of the verses to Norman Birkett, 'King among men who is entirely responsible for this effort', is a puzzle. It is not that the name Norman Birkett is unfamiliar, for the Norman Birkett, 1st Baron Birkett (1883-1962), who was a barrister, a Liberal M.P., a judge at Nuremberg, and, ultimately, as a Lord of Appeal in Ordinary, a member of the House of Lords, is well known; nor is it a

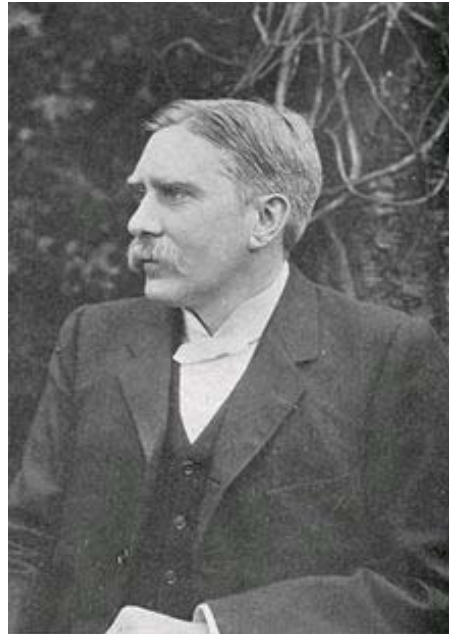
⁴ Cooper was born on 17 June 1884, Platt on 13 September 1884. William Bridge, in his biography, says of Platt, that he 'had few friends' at Eton, 'but what he had were good'; that at 15, he 'began an attempt at serious reading instigated by his friend Bryan'; and that he 'wanted to appear in private theatricals but something always prevented it, but wrote many plays'.

⁵ Ibid., 'My firm Platt Bros. Oldham supply textile machinery to the whole world & we employ about 5,000 skilled hands.' Platt's grandfather had been the Liberal M.P. for Oldham.

⁶ Ibid., 'To Adjutant / 19th Royal Hussars / From Captain Platt / 19th Royal Hussars / Machine Gun School / G.H.Q. / September 28th 1915 / Application for Transfer / Sir, / I have the honour to request that this my application for transfer to the 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards be submitted, also that I may be permitted to be attached pending transfer to that battalion on completion of this course of instruction on October 5th. / I have seen the Commanding Officer who is willing to take me. / I have the honour to be / Sir / Your obedient servant / H. E. Platt / Captain / 19th Hussars.'

quibble that this man was not of the right age, for he was but a year the senior of Cooper and Platt. The hesitation arises because this Birkett was neither at Eton nor in the army; and because his background was altogether different. He was a Methodist draper's son from Lancashire, who left school at 14, aspiring to be a Methodist preacher. Such a background was an improbable springboard to distinction in the law and legislature, and one, at first sight, that renders it improbable that he was an associate of the military versifiers.

The idea nevertheless lingers that the 'king among men' who was 'entirely responsible for this effort' might have been Norman Birkett [*photo*: below left], the draper's son from Ulverston. That this young man's earnest character and literary ability had won the admiration of the machine gunners, is a possibility nourished by the knowledge that Arthur Christopher Benson (1862-1925) [*photo*: below right], the widely influential literary man remembered as the author of the words of 'Land of Hope and Glory', knew both Birkett and the Etonians.



Benson had taught at Eton for eighteen years (1885-1903) before going to Cambridge to become a Fellow of Magdalene. Birkett entered Cambridge as a mature student in 1907, and his university career, which included the Presidency of the Union, and twice winning the English Essay Prize, was the foundation of his reputation. In Benson, with whom he had corresponded even before he went up to Cambridge, Birkett had a mentor. In accounting for the machine gunners' dedication of their verses, the conjecture is ventured that Benson put his Cambridge protégé in touch with his former pupils.

KENNETH FERGUSON