

INTERVIEW
DISCURSO DIRECTO



Roland Leighton in uniform, taken in 1915
by an unknown photographer.
From David Leighton's family papers

Roland Leighton as Man and Poet¹

Interview with David Leighton

Interviewer: Paula Campos Fernández
London, 24th March, 2017

Roland Aubrey Leighton was born in London in 1895. He grew up in an active literary environment, as he was the adored son of Robert Leighton, a writer of adventure stories, and Marie Connor Leighton, a successful romance novelist. At Uppingham School in Rutland, he edited the school magazine, where he published his first poems, won the Classic prizes, and was later to become a quartermaster sergeant in the Officer's Training Corps. During his time at Uppingham he met those who would become his closest friends: Edward Brittain and Victor Richardson. It was also in those days that he met Edward's sister, Vera Brittain, the well-known pacifist and feminist writer, who would later become his fiancée. In 1914, Roland was awarded the Classical Postmastership at Oxford. But the Great War broke out and, like so many of his generation, instead of continuing his studies he volunteered for the army at the first opportunity and was eventually posted to France in early 1915. Of those who had been school prefects with him in 1914, only one quarter survived a further two years. During his time at the front he exchanged a great number of letters with Vera, where they discussed British society, the war and literature. Some of his poems were included in the correspondence sent to Vera. On 23 December 1915 Roland died of wounds in Louvencourt, France, after

¹ My interest in Roland Leighton started in the early summer of 2016, when I discovered his poetry. Later, during the seminar "English Literature: Silence, Memory and Identity", lectured by Professor Luísa Maria Flora from September 2016 to January 2017 at the School of Arts and Humanities (FLUL), University of Lisbon, I had the opportunity to develop this interest in Leighton's work together with a deeper knowledge of the historic and literary context of the Great War.

having been shot through the stomach by a sniper while inspecting wire in the trenches at Hébuterne. He was only 20 years old.

His work feeds on the British romantic poets, as clearly reflected in his first youth poems, published during his school days in the Uppingham's *The School Magazine* (e.g. "Triolet" or "Clair de Lune"). In this first period, however, some of his poems already show his taste for a decadent aesthetic, present in the French symbolists, in Swinburne's poetry or in the one written by Adela Florence Nicolson under the pseudonym Laurence Hope: *The Garden of Kama and Other Love Lyrics from India*; all of these authors are among his favourite readings. The presence of the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic and orientalism in Leighton can also be noticed in poems like "The Crescent and the Cross" and "On a Picture by Herbert Schmaltz".

Notwithstanding the significant classic training Leighton received at Uppingham Public School, his readings reveal his interest in modern literature: *The Story of an African Farm* by Olive Schreiner (1883), *Walden or Life in the Woods* by Henry David Thoreau (1854), *An Iceland Fisherman* by Pierre Loti (1886), *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy (1891) or *On the Eve* by Ivan Turgenev (1860) are among his readings. Significantly, all these novels have some elements in common, such as human isolation, the presence of nature, the melancholy state of mind, and the tendency for contemplation that we find in most of his poems.

The outbreak of the Great War contributed to the transformation of poetry in general. The pastoral element of traditional lyrical poetry is no longer useful to express the contradictory reality in which the young poet-soldier has to live. This new reality will be responsible for and shape the fragmentary conception of Modernism. The conflict between the pastoral world and the dystopian reality of the war and Leighton's attempt to try to bring them together is magnificently reflected in his poem "Violets".

The initial, heroic and idealized vision Leighton had of the war was directly inherited from the military education system of the public schools at that time. On the other hand, the author's mother, the novelist Marie Leighton, read to him works by Henry Newbolt, Conan Doyle, Quiller Couch or John Masefield, that also contributed to creating this vision. The

first poem published by Leighton in Uppingham's *The School Magazine* when he was 18, "L'Envoi", already reflects values of manliness, such as courage, fame and camaraderie.

Another poem by Leighton, "Ploegsteert", written after two months at the front, echoes some of Rupert Brooke's famous 1914 sonnets (particularly "The Dead") in which the value of honour and patriotism together with a heroic vision of death are praised. The contents of the volume *1914 & Other Poems*, which Brittain had given to Leighton, Leighton, was, however, met with growing rejection of and disenchantment with the idealized vision of the battle. His direct contact with war, where absolute horror was part of his everyday life, made him understand its total uselessness. War had been reduced for him to a complete waste of human life, as he reports to Vera plainly in one of the letters he sends her in September 1915, in which he also completely rebels against the values exalted by Brooke's poetry, which he had so fervently admired only a few months before.

In various of the last poems Leighton wrote, the subject of death and the image of the tomb appear recurrently. Among these poems are "Dust, only dust, and passion's foetid breath" or the one recently found "For I shall be born in a brothel". The title of another poem he had started to write in September 1915 and which is unfortunately missing today, is also revealing: "Broken I came from out the Ditch of Death". Pessimism and an ironic tone can also be found in the letters he sent to Vera during his last months at the front.

David Leighton was born in England in 1931. He was evacuated to Canada during the Second World War and studied at Bryanston, an English public school, for four years until he returned to England. He later became a Lieutenant in the British Intelligence Corps in Austria during compulsory military service and studied Spanish and French at Oxford University. He had a business career before becoming a foreign language lecturer in Adult Education in Britain and an English teacher at a German technical college. Nowadays he is still a Member of the Chartered Institute of Linguists (London) as well as an Oxford MA.

Our interviewee considers himself something of a dilettante. At present he continues to work enthusiastically on propagating and supporting the works of his uncle, the poet Roland Leighton, and his aunt Clare Leighton, the wood-engraver artist.

Note: The opportunity for the present interview with Roland Leighton's nephew, David Leighton, was occasioned by my intent to pursue research on the virtually unknown figure of Roland Leighton and his short but promising career as a poet of the Great War. The interview took place in London, on the 24th of March 2017.

How did you come up with the idea of publishing Roland's poems in 1981?

I was the first person who did any of that. Publishing is rather a grand word, I just had it printed. I saw this BBC program in 1979, *Testament of Youth*, a TV mini-series and I realised that it was really something that ought to be done. That's when I went through papers and I just had that little version printed privately. Then, I sent a few copies to the Western Front Association. I thought that Roland's poems deserved to be published.

I noticed that Roland's poem titled "On a Picture by Herbert Schmaltz", a manuscript I found at the First World War Poetry Digital Archive, was not included in this booklet. I was wondering, was there any special reason for that?

I left out the lines "On a Picture by Herbert Schmaltz" mainly because I wanted to present a coherent sequence of poems leading from the school experience, via Vera, to death. Like some others of Roland's short pieces those lines didn't seem relevant to that sequence.

Have Roland's poems ever been translated into any other language, as far as you know?

As far as I know, the only other translation of Roland's poems is one I made into French for the Louvencourt Visitor's Book of his poem "Vale".

And so, farewell. All our sweet songs are sung,
 Our red rose-garlands withered;
 The sun-bright day
 —Silver and blue and gold—
 Wearied to sleep.

The shimmering evening, like a grey, soft bird,
 Barred with the blood of sunset,
 Has flown to rest
 Under the scented wings
 Of the dark-blue Night.

(See David Leighton's translation below)

Et donc adieu. Finies nos chansons douces,
 Flêtries nos guirlandes de roses, jadis rouges;
 Le jour brillant
 D'azur, d'argent et d'or
 S'endort, tout fatigué.

Le soir miroitant, cet oiseau mou et gris,
 Barré de sang au coucher du soleil
 A fuit vers son repos
 Sous les ailes parfumées
 de la nuit bleue et obscure.

In some of the correspondence between Vera Brittain and Roland while he was at the front in France, Roland mentions his doubts on what he is destined to be in life. He wants to continue to be part of soldier life, but at the same time he is aware of his need to be creative, as well as intellectually motivated.

Yes, yes. In one of those things he says, he said he was destined for the Indian Civil Service but I don't think he was... Well, I'm sure he would have been well respected by his men because he was brought up with an unselfish attitude, and you need to think of the men first. Surely, he would have been a popular officer, no doubt. But it wouldn't have been enough for him.

Do you think he would have become an editor?

He had an interest in editing and edited Uppingham's *The School Magazine* while he was at school. I'm sure he could have become an editor. I'm sure he could have done that.

Both of your grandparents were writers: Robert Leighton wrote boys' adventure books and Marie Connor Leighton was a prolific romantic novelist. Roland must have developed his literary interest and talent from a very young age under the influence of his parents. Could you tell us more about how Roland was raised at home?

Roland's father, Robert Leighton, was trained in youth as a printer and bookbinder. Later, he also became a literary editor of the *Daily Mail* at the time. He wrote about forty books of adventure stories, most of them had historical themes, and they were all aimed at what we will now call teenagers. These were considered an influence in the building of the British Empire. The best known writer of that kind was G. A. Henty. Although full of literary merit—I ought to say—completely, completely politically incorrect nowadays. One of my favourites was *In the Land of Juju*. They produced very nice editions, illustrated, and were much used as school prizes, specially in public schools.

On the other hand, Roland's mother, Marie Leighton, was a very successful romantic novelist, and published most of her novels in serial form in the popular press (65 novels). She was the family's main breadwinner, so this is why Roland said he was always a bit of a feminist, because he could see his mother earned more, up until the First World War.

Tempestuous Petticoat, later written by Roland's sister Clare, tells a great deal about the Leighton household. Roland was terribly spoiled. Marie had had a child who died in infancy and she took particular care of Roland. And she was really very unkind to the other children. He was her favourite, always dressed up in fancy clothes when small... And Roland was such a sponge for poetry and she loved poetry. So Marie used to read him poems as a child when she went to say goodnight to him in bed. And the sort of poems she read to him were Henry Newbolt's, who wrote war poems and glorified warfare:

The sand of the desert is sodden red,
 Red with the wreck of a square that broke;
 The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead,
 And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.
 The river of death has brimmed his banks,
 And England's far, and Honour a name,
 But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:
 'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

Very very belligerent poetry, but he was very popular around the First World War.

The public school system helped to create an ideal of war and a certain model of what a man had to be like. How do you think this type of education may have influenced all these young English boys before and during the Great War?

As a male to have superior education meant that you were brought up to feel that it was your responsibility to take responsibility. You were destined to have a role and there was absolutely no question of rebelling against it for many people. Especially in the Public School System. Because we were brought up to believe that we all needed to be leaders.

Roland had a very close and special relationship with his mother, as it is described in Boy of my heart, a book Marie wrote and published anonymously after Roland's death. It is very interesting to see how naturally he writes to her in French sometimes. There's a particular letter that Roland writes to his mother the month before he died in which he quotes a poem by Verlaine "Le ciel est par-dessus le toit" in order to express what he is going through at the front: "Qu'as-tu fait/ ô toi que voilà/ pleurant sans cesse/ dis, qu'as-tu fait/ toi que voilà/ de ta jeunesse".

That doesn't surprise me at all because he went into French at School. But his mother Marie was educated in France for quite a while, she was partly raised there. She was really keen on French so she used to get them to recite French verbs and poems.

That Verlaine's poem has reminded me of that poem by Rubén Darío... [He recites a few lines]: "Juventud, divino tesoro, ¡ya te vas para no volver!... Cuando quiero llorar, no lloro, y a veces, lloro sin querer..."

Your aunt Clare Leighton, Roland's younger sister, would later become a talented artist and wood-engraver. Did you meet her in the US? What was it like to meet her? Could you tell us more about her figure and work?

Well, I had met her before as a child, but meeting her as a grown up was very powerful, really. The halves of the family had grown completely apart and she had her own life. Going over there, made me feel "Gosh, it's alright to like literature, it's alright to like poetry, you don't have to be a military officer in order to be worthy". And that was a big education for me. She had never had a child so she saw me as a bit of a son as well. It was very fruitful and that's why she made me the sole executive of her estate and everything. Ever since then, I've tried to propagate her work, giving talks and that sort of thing.

Clare had a longterm relationship with a leftwing journalist, H.N. Brailsford, who was the editor of a leftwing magazine. He decided to use modern artists to illustrate it and selected some of Clare's work to illustrate the journal. And they eventually went to live together. As he grew older and weaker, more demanding, her own work suffered. She just felt she couldn't go on so she took up a contact that she had in the States and lectured at University for a while. Eventually, she was able to earn her own living by writing and woodengraving. She had a very interesting life. In England she describes the life in the country in her book *Four Hedges*. In her autobiography, she also writes about her own thoughts on teaching art.

Once in America, Clare writes about countrylife in North Carolina. I stayed with her in Connecticut. What was so nice about it, I found she had a very wide range of friends and contacts... She wasn't too keen on coming back to England, she did, twice, but it was unhappy for her. Her book *Tempestuous Petticoat: The Story of an Invincible Edwardian* is exactly the book where you see what the Leighton family was like, it's really very amusing.

What can you say about your father, Evelyn Leighton? What was the picture of Roland you had from him?

Well, my father was the youngest. Roland always seemed to be very superior, there was no doubt that Roland was Marie's favourite. Neither my father

nor my aunt Clare talked about this very much, but they admired Roland.

Once Roland died, he certainly would have had some extra esteem inside, I'm sure: "I've got to be as good as he was now..."

My father was rather a distant figure and he really cut himself off from the family. He was brought up to be a naval officer. In those days they used to train naval officers from the age of thirteen. It was a way of getting a good education if you couldn't afford a lot of money and they gave you as much attention as any public school would. By the time he left he was 17, as he was in the Navy at the end of the First World War. He was a midshipman then, who is not a commissioned officer but is clearly marked out to become one. All the navy officers at that time had quite a good education, as part of the functions of the Navy was to be diplomatic and be as nice and pleasant as they possibly could. They were all fairly well read. My father was always very driven but at the same time he had a literary talent that was never used. I got a few notes that he wrote there. Then, when he retired he wrote a certain amount of a pantomime as well.

Being aware of your own personal family history and its relationship with the Great War, how did you experience the Second World War?

I had a very easy time indeed. In 1940 my mother, my sister, my grandmother, we all went over to Canada and we lived there for four years. That's when I went to a very military school in Canada. We all dressed up in military uniforms. It was a private school, the local wealthy old boys of the school paid for a lot of English evacuees to be educated there. I was one of those and I was very very lucky. And then we came back to England in an air-craft-carrier in 1944, that was just when the Atlantic was getting a little bit safer because it was clear that the Allies were going to win... So it was less risky to come back.

In 2015, a ceremony in Roland's honour took place at the local council of Louvencourt, France, where he is buried in the British Military Cemetery. This village named a road "Allée Roland Leighton". How did you experience this ceremony? Why is it important to younger generations to still be learning about the First World War through these events today?

The ceremony was very moving. I quoted Charles Péguy's poem "Heureux ceux qui sont morts, car ils sont retournés/ Dans la première argile et la première terre". Our son Caspar read Roland's poem "Vale" in my French translation and then in English. Our grandson aged 12 unveiled the new plaque indicating the "Allée Roland Leighton". All of us need to remember how easily disagreements can lead to violence that goes far beyond any sensible resolution of cultural or economic conflict.

In a published review of the Louvencourt Ceremony, you wrote "It becomes clear that nationality is hardly relevant. The real enemy is human greed and pettiness". What is your opinion about Europe's current situation with the new rise of nationalism and about UK's Brexit?

Where can one start? I see Brexit as a total disaster. As soon as the result of the Referendum was known I wrote letters of apology to two of my closest friends on the European mainland, distancing our whole family from what we thought was the great leap backwards into the twentieth century. I know there are serious problems within the EU, but they will not be solved by individual countries running away. Unfortunately, to appreciate this, one needs wide horizons, and many people throughout the EU, understandably, do not have them. Hence populism has grown and politicians are taking advantage of it. We need more education, a narrower gap between rich and poor. In the UK, the Liberal Democrat Party campaigns for a second referendum when the terms of exit are known; the first referendum inevitably was responded to in ignorance of the consequences. It attracted anyone with a reason to be discontented with anything; it was easy to blame the EU for everything. Island-dwellers, of course, tend to be "insular", which may be why UK first agitated to leave. Also I suspect there is a legacy of frustrated imperial arrogance—a bit like the generation of 1898 in Spain, perhaps.