

VERY LIKE A WHALE

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This is an extended version of a talk given at the Society's Buffet Luncheon held at the Savile Club on 27 October 2006.

Polonius My lord, the Queen would speak with you, and presently.
Hamlet Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?
Polonius By th' mass and 'tis, like a camel indeed.
Hamlet Methinks it is like a weasel.
Polonius It is backed like a weasel.
Hamlet Or like a whale?
Polonius Very like a whale. (*Hamlet* Act 3 Sc ii)

This interchange brings to mind H.I., sitting in the Lyceum stalls surrounded by nervous lieutenants, giving his ever-forthright opinions on scenery, music, props., furniture, costumes, to which they would all readily concur and he, mischievously, would then reverse his opinion just to see them attempt, like Polonius, a similarly swift U-turn. 'Or like a whale?' 'Very like a whale.'

In his monumental 1951 biography of his grandfather, Laurence Irving said of H.I.'s stage-manager, Harry Loveday:

'If his acquiescence in every word or whim his Chief expressed was something of a joke among the company, it sprang from a lifelong devotion to his friend and from an inherent belief that all he said or did was divinely inspired. In return, Irving treated Loveday with a trust and affection which was never so apparent in his relations with Stoker.'

Friendship, therefore, is my theme. Friendship and character, for one surely depends upon the other. We all need friends to a greater or lesser extent; to Irving friendship was central to his private life and important in the development of his career, and as shall see, he developed an extraordinary emotional charge which overwhelmed audiences and acquaintances, and whose fall-out is still perceptible a century after his death.

Henry Irving, it was often remarked, was essentially a lonely man. After his marriage failed he lived solitarily in a gloomy flat; his relatives were remote; his bitterly antagonistic wife ensured that he had little contact with his sons—and that they were brought up to regard him almost as the anti-Christ. Of home life he had none. Friendships therefore were vital to a man who, despite his austere appearance and intimidating personality, was warm-hearted and affectionate. Some took advantage of his essentially generous nature, claiming close acquaintance, especially as his fame and prestige grew, for to boast of comradeship with so august a figure raised one's own stock. But genuine friendships were cherished assiduously, even those made before he went on the stage.

What did it take to be befriended by Irving? Like all of us, he took to people with whom he felt in sympathy, and who displayed honesty and integrity. A love of the theatre was essential, of course, and also, I regret to say, a penchant for practical jokes. For the purposes of this paper I recently re-read J. L. Toole's *Reminiscences*, and was dismayed at the number of pages devoted to pranks which must have been bewildering and on occasion downright upsetting to the victims. But these sometimes very elaborate japes were of the age, and perhaps I am over-reacting. That no women ever indulged in these games only underlines their puerility. Let us pass on.

We are assured that the child is father to the man, but who could ever have known that little Johnnie Brodribb from Somerset would become the mighty Sir Henry Irving? He was an only child, unusual for those days, and a move to unhealthy Bristol from the country air of Keinton

Mandeville prompted his parents to send the four-year-old to relations in Cornwall, a separation which must have distressed the infant profoundly. Once a year his mother would fetch him for a brief visit to Bristol, via the packet steamer from St Ives. How eagerly anticipated these reunions must have been, and how bitter the tears of parting when the day came to return to Halsetown. Then, at the age of ten, the boy experienced another bewildering upheaval. His Uncle Isaac Penberthy died and his parents, now living in the City of London, decided he should rejoin them permanently.

The contrast of life in a tiny Cornish tin-mining village with the bustle of the Square Mile must have seemed overwhelming, but there are no indications of any lasting trauma. Nonetheless, we may assume that the two significant events in his young life—the first wrenching him from his parents and the second from his cousins—must have affected him sorely. Speculation is always dangerous, but I think it not unreasonable to place these two upheavals at the core of Irving's well-known resilience, his phlegmatic temperament, and, when his destiny made itself manifest, his steely resolve.

Whence did this so unlikely an ambition, the Stage, emerge? Jeffrey Richards suggests it was fanned into flame by the tenor of the times. Victorian Britain was becoming less riotous and more orderly, less brutal and more humane, largely due to the rise of evangelicalism and the ideals of chivalry, as exemplified by the Arthurian legends. My own view is that the Stage subsumed all Brodribb's thoughts and interests; that he abandoned his faith we know from Isabel Bateman ('The man she loved was not a believer') and his political beliefs remain shadowy, though we can posit a vague Liberalism. Gothic legends, a powerful Episcopalian moral framework, Romanticism—a heady brew for a youth seeking his life's purpose. So why not the Stage?

It's telling that so many people described Henry Irving in similar terms. In the Centenary *First Knight* O. B. Clarence's memoir showed him still mourning the death of his hero nearly forty years later: 'It can hardly be possible to convey with mere words to anyone who had never seen Sir Henry Irving, the power of his extraordinary appeal... He possessed that rare quality in an actor, possessed by only a few—he had magnetism: one could hardly take one's eyes off him.'

Austin Brereton (H.I.'s press-agent and biographer) writing in the 1920s said much the same: 'It is impossible for the present generation of playgoers to understand the affection and reverence in which Henry Irving was held.' Robert Hichens, co-writer with H. D. Traill of *The Medicine Man*, an 1898 Lyceum disaster, observed: 'Irving was the most mesmeric actor I have ever seen. In any assembly, and much more in any theatrical company, he stood out as an unique personality.' And Sir Squire Bancroft, who knew Irving better than most, said: 'Without being in the least distant or proud, he was reticent and secretive; yet such was his peculiar force and magnetism that many thought they were intimate with him who were never really allowed to be so.' Even that arch-ironist Max Beerbohm, wrote on 21 October 1905, 'Irving's presence dominated even those who could not be enchanted by it. His magnetism was intense, and unceasing.'

I would like to offer a word other than mesmeric, magnetic, or enchanting. How about charismatic? An over-used word nowadays and thus fast losing its force, but originally meaning divine gift, which bestowed upon its bearer a preternatural ability to charm, to influence, to command respect. Doesn't that describe Irving to a T? Napoleon, Nelson, Gladstone, Gandhi, Kennedy, Mandela—is it too far-fetched to add Irving to this list of charismatics? They all affected their contemporaries profoundly, and in their respective spheres they all changed the world order.

For many the contact remained unrequited. As we have seen, Bram Stoker, H.I.'s business

manager, did not share the closeness with the Guv'nor which Loveday enjoyed. Why not, one wonders? Bram was indefatigable, painstaking and efficient, but the excitement of their early association, heightened by the exhilaration of setting up the Lyceum company, did not lead to lasting rapport. In Paul Murray's 2005 biography of Stoker he quotes a letter from H.I. to Bram dated October 1878 which ends 'with love, in great haste, Henry'. But within ten months, while on holiday after that first tumultuous Lyceum season, H.I. was signing himself to Bram curtly as 'yours sincerely'.

So already the relationship, at least on Irving's side, was cooling. Could it have been that Bram was middle-class, a published author and a graduate, whereas Irving's lowly origins and barely adequate schooling left him with something of a chip on his shoulder? Did Bram overstep the mark and attempt to penetrate the Irving carapace too soon, too importunately? Did he need reminding that he was, after all, only a subordinate? A valued subordinate, to be sure, but still an employee. It is noteworthy that on all playbills and programmes Bram was designated Acting Manager. The actual Manager was, and would always be, Henry Irving.

On the other hand was Bram too impressionable, too compliant? ('Or like a whale?' 'Very like a whale'). I don't know the truth of the matter, nor have I read any convincing argument to explain why Bram was never one of the inner circle. This must have galled the Irishman, and it has to be admitted that Irving did not treat him kindly. For instance, he ignored Bram's advice not to sell the Lyceum lease, nor did he mention Bram in his will, which after twenty-seven years' service must have been hurtful in the extreme.

In his *Recollections* Bram himself declared sadly that, 'In those last seven years of his life I was not able to see so much of him as I had been in the habit of doing throughout the previous twenty.' From 1898 onwards financial blows, artistic misjudgments and ill-health reduced Irving to the shadow of the man he had been; he shrank into himself and was far less often seen at his clubs. Bram again: 'Seldom now were the old long meetings when...idea leads on idea till presently the secret chambers of the soul are made manifest.' This kind of overblown, over-coloured thinking bespeaks the novelist, and is perhaps another indication why Irving, whose gush-detector was set permanently on stun, kept Bram emotionally at arm's length.

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Henry Irving's stature increased exponentially with his fame; meeting him for the first time must have daunted even the most self-possessed. He carried, as they say, a lot of baggage, and there can have been few who shook his hand without a tremor of inadequacy. The American stage director, Hal Prince, once declared a preference for star names in his shows because 'Stars have more colours'. And who had more colours than Irving? As Sir Frederick Wedmore wrote, '[Irving] was more interesting than any character he played.', and Max Beerbohm admitted that '...as a personality, he was flawless—armed at all points in an impenetrable and darkly-gleaming armour of his own design. *The Knight from Nowhere* was the title of a little book of pre-Raphaelite poems that I once read. I always thought of Irving as the Knight from Nowhere'.

As H.I.'s persona matured and deepened, he became dauntingly multi-faceted: gregarious but solitary, aloof but clubbable, sardonic but generous, majestic but simple, feared but revered. There were those who loudly and proudly claimed to be immune from his spell, and many who denied his genius. But even they never showed him despite or hatred; even his sharpest critics respected his probity and idealism. Although later renowned as a tragedian, he made his reputation in London in what he himself described as eccentric characters. On his wedding certificate and in the 1871 Census he gave his occupation is given as Comedian, a word which then carried the

French connotation of performer in general, but I often think that to him his whole life and career were, in a sense, an ineffable comedy.

His pince nez, his long hair and sharply angled, clean-shaven face—only actors and Roman Catholic priests were clean-shaven in the Victorian era—and his slightly dandyish clothes all helped to make him an iconic figure. He was instantly recognisable, easily cartooned, and highly imitable. But what a presence. On his entrance into the Garrick Club everyone stood, a sign of respect usually afforded only to royalty. Nor was it unknown for theatre audiences to rise as he entered the auditorium. Princes and Presidents and Peers lined up to shake his hand, to invite him to their grand houses, to chat the night away. The limping stammering boy from the West Country must have revelled in all that.

Occasionally we read of delays in answering letters, but his vast personal correspondence shows how much he valued and maintained personal contact. Bram Stoker claimed to write up to sixty letters a day on Lyceum business; when H.I.'s elder son, Harry, failed to acknowledge a present his father pointed out that he himself had to write thirty to forty letters a day. No wonder his handwriting is well-nigh indecipherable, and we look forward to the final cataloguing of the two thousand or so letters in the Theatre Museum's collection, an immense labour of love undertaken by Frances Hughes and Helen R. Smith which will give us an important insight into Irving's day-to-day preoccupations.

ILLUSTRATION 5a

CAPTION:

After the Ball

Watercolour/gouache caricature signed F. Stevens and dated 1893. H.I. and Squire Bancroft are shown supporting J.L.Toole, all three somewhat the worse for drink. Reproduced by kind permission of Bruce Cleave. The title refers to the popular song *After the Ball* which had arrived in Britain the previous year from the US. A similar drawing by Phil May, entitled *After the Supper*, is in the Garrick Club.

I suggest that Henry Irving enjoyed three levels of friendship. First, work-based relationships such as his staff, stage-management and actors. The assembling of his original Lyceum team in 1878 shows how much he owed to instinct as much as personal predilections. When the call came the chosen ones did not hesitate: Bram Stoker—who was so keen to sign on for the adventure that he brought his wedding day forward by a whole year—journeyed from Dublin, Harry Loveday brought his family from Manchester, and Hamilton Clarke, whom Irving had met on a train, came from Scotland as musical director. Also from Manchester came the architect Alfred Darbyshire to remodel the run-down Lyceum, and from Sunderland came two actors who had encouraged the callow eighteen-year-old struggling to hold on to his first professional engagement. We all know the story of Irving expressing his gratitude by saying, 'When I rise, I shan't forget this.' Nor did he, and thus did Tom Mead (in 1874) and Sam Johnson (in 1878) rally to the flag. For them all it was a gamble, but their confidence was to be rewarded by the Guv'nor's unyielding loyalty and a share of the glories to come.

The second level of friendship would be those to whom Irving was close on a personal rather than a professional level, such as the Russell-Cotes family in Bournemouth, the R. H. Wyndhams in Edinburgh, the Calverts in Manchester, the Pollock and Coleridge families in London and literary Americans such as Sam Elliott, William Winter and Joseph Hatton. Also in this category were the fellow-members of his Clubs: the Garrick, Green Room (of which he was a founder member),

Athenaeum, Reform, Savage, and the Marlborough (for which he was proposed by the Prince of Wales and seconded by the Duke of Fife—friends in high places indeed). Members of all these could, and often did, claim friendship, no matter how casual and occasional their association.

It might seem surprising that Irving took little interest in Freemasonry. He was a member of several lodges, but seems to have had neither the time nor taste for the arcane rituals, taking five and a half years to become a master mason from his initiation into the prestigious Jerusalem Lodge in 1877. Why bother with the Craft at all? At that period membership was expected of the rising man, underwriting one's worth and status, and Irving would not have wished to give offence by disdaining so respected an institution.

The third level of Irving's friends were the few, the very few, who enjoyed access to the inner man. As Brereton wrote: 'Henry Irving was a sealed book to all, save to some three or four men to whom he sometimes drew aside the curtain which, to the world, veiled his heart.' Who were they? Unquestionably first in his affections was the immensely popular low comedian J. L. Toole; their first meeting was very early in H.I.'s career in Edinburgh in 1857, and the strength of their friendship remained undiminished until the day Irving died. (It is surely significant in the two men's relationship that Toole's business manager was George Loveday, Harry's brother.) Other top-level confidantes may have included—and here there is much room for argument—Louis F. Austin, Squire Bancroft, John Hare, Frank Marshall, Charles Mathews jnr., and Joe Comyns Carr, though this last turned out to be a false friend, virtually tricking the actor out of his Lyceum lease and causing Irving immense stress and bitterness in his declining years.

Another aspect of Irving which was much commented upon was his smile, whose unexpected sweetness which made those upon whom it was bestowed go weak at the knees. But there was something further about this man, something perhaps a little eerie.

W. L. Courtney, critic and editor, said of him: 'In some undefined way, he conveyed the impression that he stood apart—that his personality moved in a sphere of its own, and that though in bodily presence he was there, the spiritual part of the man was wandering elsewhere—in worlds unrealised.' The novelist Horace Annersley Vachell had the same impression: 'Irving, unlike other knights of the buskin, appeared to soar above himself into an empyrean remote from ordinary criticism. Always that tall gaunt figure gripped us. His cleanly chiselled features and his glittering eyes always held and fascinated us... Almost he seemed to us as a being apart, though we knew from his hosts of friends and cronies he was very human. Everyone wanted to claim friendship or crony-like intimacy, and after he had died who was to say them nay?'

I have yet to mention Irving's female friends, a select circle which provided him with distraction from his cares and a measure of undemanding domesticity. The reader may think it unseemly to mention Henry Irving and the baser instincts in the same breath, but if we are to consider the whole man we must brace ourselves to discuss the undiscussable. The swift arrival of H.I.'s sons—the first just over a year after marrying the feisty but charmless Florence and the second after their short-lived reconciliation—imply the customary natural urges, though I suspect that after his wife made it plain how much she despised the theatre H.I. decided he was wedded more to his calling than to her, and therefore not to bother with all that messy business again. It was altogether too distracting.

Which brings me to his most celebrated female comrade, Ellen Terry. They could not have remained in so lengthy a stage partnership without at least liking one another, but were they also lovers? On the only occasion I met Laurence Irving I put this question to him: he said no. In 1997 his son, our patron John H. B. Irving, spent several months in the United States on the trail of a cache of letters which it was hoped, amongst other revelations, would settle the matter once and for all. Alas, the letters, if they exist, remain undiscovered. My opinion is that H.I. and E.T.

were not lovers in the modern sense of the word. That they loved and respected one another is apparent from the surviving correspondence, but H.I. was too aware of the fragility of his social standing—a separated but still-married actor—to risk scandal and the loss of his hard-won esteem by sleeping with his leading lady. The late Sir Michael Davies, retired High Court Judge and keen member of the Irving Society, conducted his own investigation and also concluded that there was no convincing evidence of a liaison. For Irving, romance was confined to the stage, where he could control the outcome. Ellen Terry was a loving friend, not a friendly lover.

The journalist Mrs Aria (1866-1934) was one of those mother-figures like Mrs Bateman, Baroness Burdett-Coutts and her companion Mrs Hannah Brown, who took it upon themselves to look after Irving when he was most in need. She came into Irving's life at a dinner party in 1897, 'when he had been much amused by her direct manner and dry wit.' She was Jewish, separated with a young daughter, and at that first meeting she thanked him for his sympathetic treatment of Shylock. H.I. was instantly charmed. Did the friendship advance from the drawing-room to the bedroom? A distinguished historian declared recently that Mrs A was indeed Irving's mistress, but when I asked for evidence he could only offer 'historian's instinct'. Now, I am not saying he was wrong, but 'historian's instinct' doesn't really cut it for me as proof. Nevertheless, she was an important part of Irving's life for his last eight years, and even E.T. voiced her approval. Henry needed caring for, and while Walter Collinson, his long-serving dresser, looked after the mundane day-to-day necessities of existence, Eliza Aria offered good company and a sensible, practical companionship. In her 1922 autobiography she wrote:

'Assuredly very few knew Irving, though many relate with gusto of long interviews with him, when they had given him counsel on productions and scenery, on the actors he should engage and those he should dismiss. "Henry, you should have produced Ibsen," is of that I-said-to-him category, recently enraging me from the mouth of a man who would scarcely have had the pluck to bid him good morning.'

Mrs Aria also referred to terms of address used by Irving:

'Though his letters and his telegrams were cordial, even affectionate, he rarely addressed anybody by a Christian name: invariably he used surnames. Toole, his closest comrade, was never Johnnie to him; Walter Collinson, his most trusted attendant, was alone 'Walter' to his constant calling. Never was Pinero 'Arthur', nor Hatton 'Joe', nor Stoker 'Bram', nor Tree 'Herbert'. Yet in many printed pages all these and more have been given intimate names by him.'

Austin Brereton again:

'Immediately after his death—so anxious were many people to show their acquaintance with him—a whole crop of "intimate friends" came suddenly into being, which was very amusing in the case of a man who in the whole course of his life had no more intimate friends than could be counted upon the fingers of one hand.'

Irving was renowned, even notorious, for his compassion and generosity, especially to those who had fallen in hard times. Within a few weeks of taking over the Lyceum he started a Provident & Benevolent Fund for his employees; in 1882 together with Toole and Bancroft he founded the Actors' Benevolent Fund; his last appearance as Shylock with E.T. as Portia was at Drury Lane in support of the Actors' Association. No charity appeal or benefit night went unheeded, and even if he could not attend in person his letter of apology would invariably enclose a substantial cheque. His pension list was Bram's despair. An elderly actress wrote to the Lyceum for employment, but when Bram insisted there was nothing for her H.I. suggested she could look

after the theatre cats.

‘We’ve already got four women looking after the cats,’ replied Bram. But Irving was ready. ‘Then she can look after the four women.’

He paid well and he tipped extravagantly, so much so that E.T. rebuked him for being ‘vulgar’. But he knew such largesse helped to maintain the legend, and to ensure the best service. He was not interested in money other than to fund his increasingly expensive productions, and he had known what it was like to be hungry. ‘A man never recovers,’ he once reflected, ‘from not having enough to eat when he was younger.’

A grand, distinguished and compelling personality; a gracious, courteous, honourable man whom even Bernard Shaw, artistically his arch-foe, described as ‘a good egg’. When Henry Irving died, something went out of public life, not just theatrical life, but the life of the nation. The entire country felt they had lost a friend. Let his fellow actor-manager and fellow knight, Squire Bancroft, have the last word:

‘Irving owned that mysterious power which draws towards its possessor the affection of his fellows; and he must, early in his life, have learnt the important truth that to be well served, you must first teach yourself to become beloved.’

And Henry Irving captivates us still.

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