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The
Bird of Dawning

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The Bird of Dawning
or
The Fortune of the Sea

by John Masefield

with an introduction
by Dr. Philip W. Errington

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Original spelling, grammar and punctuation retained throughout

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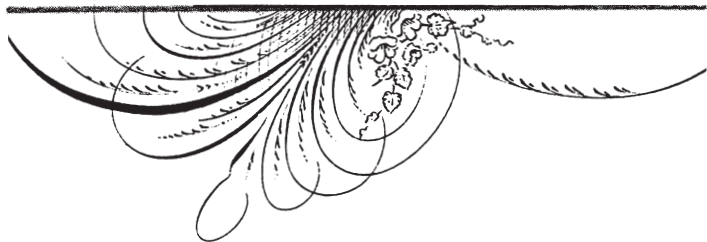
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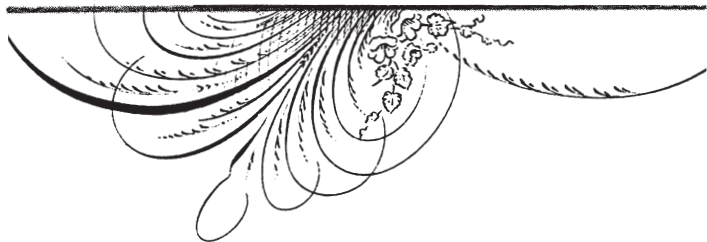


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CONTENTS

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Further Reading | 10 |
| <i>The Bird of Dawning</i> | 11 |
| Glossary | 309 |



INTRODUCTION

by Dr. Philip W. Errington

If you are of a certain age you will probably have been required to learn Masfield's 'Sea-Fever' or 'Cargoes' at school. The author regarded his inclusion in school textbooks as a 'torment of the young,' yet popularity, or at least familiarity, would lead John Betjeman to suggest these two poems would be 'remembered as long as the language lasts'. Others may be more familiar with *The Box of Delights* from a BBC television serialization in 1984. On these, Masfield's current reputation largely rests and, as a result, we have lost sight of a best-selling writer who published over 62 volumes of verse, 23 plays, 17 novels, 10 historical works and 7 volumes for children.

Masefield was born in Ledbury, Herefordshire, in 1878. Orphaned at an early age, he was educated aboard the school ship HMS *Conway* between 1891 and 1894. He was first apprenticed on a four-masted barque, the *Gilcruix*, sailing from Cardiff to Iquique in Chile via Cape Horn but fell violently ill and was returned to England classified as a Distressed British Seaman. The young man aspired to become a writer but his guardians scorned this determination. Arrangements were made for him to join another ship, this time in New York, but he had other plans. Upon arrival in America he deserted ship vowing 'to be a writer, come what might.' At the age of 17 Masefield therefore became a vagrant in America before work as a bar-hand in New York and, later, at a carpet factory in Yonkers. During this time Masefield strengthened his resolve and in 1897 he returned to England. His first poem was published in a periodical in 1899 and, with encouragement from W. B. Yeats, a volume of poetry appeared in 1902 as *Salt-Water Ballads*. It included the poem 'Sea-Fever'. Masefield's next publication, *Ballads* from 1903, would include 'Cargoes' and the writer experimented with verse, children's books, novels, naval histories, plays, literary criticism and other work before causing a literary sensation in 1911 with his long narrative poem *The Everlasting Mercy*. This story of

the reformation of a drunken poacher was branded ‘ninteths sheer filth’ by Lord Alfred Douglas and sold in vast quantities.

Masefield’s work was not solely concerned with the sea but it came as no surprise when, in 1930 upon the death of Robert Bridges, the sailor king George V appointed Masefield to be Poet Laureate. For the next thirty-seven years he worked at advancing poetry, supporting fellow writers, producing laureate odes and continuing a successful literary career. When he died in 1967 his poetry had been respected by W. B. Yeats, Thomas Hardy, Philip Larkin and A. Alvarez. His plays had been praised by Bernard Shaw and his novels by Graham Greene. Masefield had, however, written too much in a publishing career spanning just under seven decades. Academics and critics branded him an outdated rhymers of the Georgian school and his once-glistening reputation began to tarnish. In 1952, writing of second-hand bookstalls, the author stated that the ‘out-of-fashion is always cheap, and usually much better than the fashion has the wit to think’. Taken out of context it could serve as a fitting epitaph on Masefield’s work.

Although falling short of comparable greatness, Masefield is an English Conrad. A contemporary reviewer in *Punch* claimed that *The Bird of Dawning* was ‘the finest

sea-yarn ever penned' whilst the critic Sanford Sternlicht suggested that the storm scenes in the novel 'are perhaps even better than Conrad's.'

Masefield wrote *Captain Margaret*, his first novel, as an experiment after being urged to do so by his publisher and literary agent. At the time he was living Greenwich (1904–07) and his proximity to shipping encouraged the writer in his work: he noted to W. B. Yeats that 'the sailor-town is yet the one human part of London'. The novel was published in 1908. Three adult novels followed quickly with *Multitude and Solitude* in 1909, *Lost Endeavour* in 1910 and *The Street of To-Day* in 1911. The novelist then fell silent for over a decade in which poetry and plays were the favoured genre, but in 1924 a new novel, *Sard Harker*, became a best-seller and was quickly followed a couple of years later by *Odtaa*. The pace then became leisurely again and in 1933 *The Bird of Dawning* was simultaneously published by Heinemann in the U.K. and Macmillan in the U.S.

The earliest description of the book comes from the publishing agreement between Masefield and Macmillan in June 1933. There the work is described as 'a short novel dealing with the China-Tea-Race, for clipper ships, in the 1860–70 decade, centering around a strange event very well-known to the seamen of the Author's time'. The setting for the novel is indeed one of the mid-nineteenth century

annual clipper races from China to England, to bring the first tea crop of the season. The race started at Foochow, the principal Chinese port and concluded in the London docks. Masfield incidentally chose to avoid the famous race year of 1866 when three clippers arrived in London on the same tide.

The novel shows Masfield's reliance on his sea-going background although he is not simply a nautical writer. Other thematic concerns included the English countryside, Roman history, miscarriages of justice, and the legend of King Arthur but in *The Bird of Dawning*, he returns to the mythology of the sea and the yarns of his sea career. From an early age Masfield had discovered his ability to tell stories. We learn, for example, in his autobiographical account of his first term on board the *Conway*, that his ability to spin yarns was an advantage from his very first night on board. There is also one other biographical detail of importance here, which fuses with Masfield's major preoccupation with the under-dog and gives the novel its title.

The first poem in *Salt-Water Ballads* is entitled 'A Consecration'. With possible embarrassment for the future Poet Laureate, he wrote a rejection of 'princes and prelates' and claimed affinity for 'the dirt and the dross, the dust and scum of the earth'. Consequently the Masfield hero is often the under-dog: Lionel Hesseltine in *The Street of*

To-Day, Saul Kane in *The Everlasting Mercy*, Charles Cothill in *Right Royal*, Hi Ridden in *Odtaa*, for example; and these may all find their genesis in Masefield's fascination with the four-masted barque, *Wanderer*, first seen by him in 1891. Describing the ship in 1913 Masefield noted that she was 'Mocked and deserted by the common man, Made half divine to me for having failed'. In an audio recording from 1962 he introduced the *Wanderer* as 'a ship of splendour whose image for years haunted me and made me write'. The poem 'The *Wanderer*' ends with a view of the ship at Christmas heralded by the cry of 'a byre cock'. The beauty of the sailing ship, the survival of the under-dog and the regeneration promised by Christmas Day all prompt the novelist to recall Marcellus in the first scene of *Hamlet*. As the spectral figure of the recently deceased King fades 'on the crowing of the cock', Marcellus notes:

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our saviour's birth is celebrated
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
And then, they say, no spirit can walk abroad,
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallowed and so gracious is the time.

The novel was a phenomenal success: the first Heinemann edition of 15,000 copies sold out before publication. There was also a limited signed edition of 300 copies which sold for over five times the price of the regular printing. A continental paperback edition (for holiday makers abroad) was published in 1934 before an 'educational' edition in 1956, with numerous reprints. There were popular paperback editions in 1964 and 1984 and even a 'Reader's Digest' condensed version in 1965. There was also a long and intricate history of interest in the film rights of the novel. One of the first to express this was Alexander Korda but it came to nothing. When in America in 1936 Masefield was recommended to employ Messrs Myron Selznick and Company of California. He appointed them as his agents to solicit offers for talking picture rights in *Enslaved* and *The Bird of Dawning* but, again, no film resulted. In 1951 Willoughby Film Productions Ltd began negotiations. Observing that they ought to change their typewriter ribbon, Masefield stated he'd consider 'any genuine offer' and discussions advanced. One cause of concern, at the time, was that Masefield had to state his work was entirely original. This, Masefield explained to The Society of Authors, was not entirely possible:

The work is original, in that I made it, and have not had my title challenged in the twenty years that the book has lived. But I do not claim that it is all my own invention. When I was very young, a sea-captain, misled by an inner voice, wrecked his pump, let water into his ship, and abandoned her with all his crew. The crew reached port next morning, and found their ship, salvaged, repaired and water-tight, there in the port before them. This has been much talked-of by sailors for sixty years, and this point should be made very clear . . . for the theme may have been used, or may be used; that one thing was done at sea, and is known by many thousands of men to have been done. The erring Captain became a bookseller, so I was told, and I think I am right in saying that I once bought a book from him.

A couple of years later Willoughby Film Productions abandoned their plans. The novel has had rather greater success on the radio: there were BBC serial versions in 1965, 1973 and 1984.

It is a great pleasure to see the novel available once again. The text is that of the English first edition with the addition of the American sub-title. This 'Caird Library Reprint' provides an opportunity to print a brief but unpublished introduction by Masefield himself. The fol-

lowing was probably written for the 1956 educational reprint but never used. It therefore seems appropriate to leave the last word to Masfield:

When I was a boy, I was told that a Master Mariner, commanding a big ship, had obeyed an inner voice which ordered him to scuttle and abandon his ship somewhere not far from the Western Islands.

His ship was found deserted before she sank. Her salvors checked her leaks, pumped her clear, and brought her safely to a near-by port, where her master and crew found her, when they arrived safely in their boats some hours later.

The case was much talked-of among sailors for many years.

I must have seen the ship, though I have no memory of her: I knew one of her crew, though never saw him after this adventure; and I believe that I did, later, meet her Captain, who had long left the sea.

While casting about for a plot for a tale of a race among sailing-ships, this story, as it existed in sailors' minds, suggested itself to me, as something that so well might have happened to a sleepless, anxious, sea-captain, during one of the famous races of the tea-clippers, with the first of the tea from the Min River, about a hundred years ago.

I had heard much about these races, from men who had sailed in them, and had seen, now and then, two or three of the ships that had taken part in them, all now, somewhat shorn of their glory, with their sail-areas reduced, and their looks showing the fall.

In re-telling the tale, I tried to show the quality that some sea-captains have, of bringing their crews safely to port, in whatever fortune the sea gives, whether an open boat or a derelict.

Further Reading

Babington Smith, Constance. *John Masefield – A Life* (Oxford, 1978) [recently reprinted: Stroud, 2008]

Errington, Philip W. *John Masefield – The ‘Great Auk’ of English Literature* (London, 2004)

Masefield, John. *Sea-Fever – Selected Poems* (Manchester, 2005)