Desmond King-Hele

SHELLEY

His Thought and Work

Third Edition

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BY

DESMOND KING-HELE

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By the same author

SATELLITES AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
ERASMUS DARWIN
THEORY OF SATELLITE ORBITS IN AN ATMOSPHERE
SPACE RESEARCH V (*editor*)
OBSERVING EARTH SATELLITES
THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS OF ERASMUS DARWIN
THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY?
POEMS AND TRIXIES
DOCTOR OF REVOLUTION
THE R.A.E. TABLE OF EARTH SATELLITES 1957–1980 (*co-editor*)
THE LETTERS OF ERASMUS DARWIN (*editor*)

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

In this book I have tried to make a new appreciation of Shelley's poetry, both lyrics and longer poems, for readers who have no special knowledge of the subject. In the past seventy years there have been many biographies of Shelley, and many books on particular aspects of his work, but no balanced survey of his poems. The nearest approach to such a survey, Carlos Baker's study of *Shelley's Major Poetry*, excludes the lyrics by which he is best known to most readers.

I have consciously disturbed the balance of the book in only one respect, by laying extra emphasis on Shelley's scientific interests, which, it seems to me, previous commentators have unduly neglected, with the result that some of his richest poetry has not been fully appreciated.

Shelley's poetry cannot properly be divorced from his life. So I have taken the poems chronologically, and have included a thin linking thread of biography. Shelley's last four years, in Italy, when he did his best work, take up nearly three-quarters of the book, his first twenty-six years being covered in Chapters I-IV. These early chapters, especially the first, therefore carry the heaviest load of biography, and can be regarded as introductory.

The text is intended to be read without the numbered notes, most of which merely record the sources of quotations or give references for further reading.

I am grateful to Laurence Kitchin for valuable advice over a period of several years; to John Buxton, Fellow of New College, Oxford, for many comments on points of detail; and most of all to my wife, Marie, who has read and criticized the successive drafts of the book and has helped so much to improve it.

D. K.

Farnham,
October 1958

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

FOR this second edition the book has been thoroughly revised to take account of new material that has become available in the past ten years. In particular I have largely rewritten Chapter 1, so as to include discussion of the poems in the Esdaile notebook, first published in 1964; and I have altered the form and content of the book list, with the aim of providing a guide to the literature rather than a mere list of books. I have also reconsidered and sometimes amended my interpretations of Shelley's poems, particularly the *Ode to the West Wind* and *To a Skylark*. I have added two maps; given essential references to recent critical studies; and corrected the texts of all quotations from Shelley's poems and letters in the light of new editions, particularly F. L. Jones's definitive edition of Shelley's letters (1964). I am grateful to Neville Rogers and Herbert Dingle for many cogent comments which have helped me in revising the book.

D. K.

FARNHAM, *May* 1970

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

IN this third edition the text has been updated where necessary; the notes have been fully updated to include references to significant new studies; the texts of quotations from Shelley's poems have been amended in the light of recent textual studies; and a new section has been added, reviewing 86 books published since the second edition went to press in 1970. Shelley's reputation has been rising steadily in the past ten years, as shown by the many books that have appeared, the call for this third edition of my book, and the three lively and successful Shelley Conferences at Gregynog in Wales (1978, 1980 and 1982). I should like to express my gratitude to Geoffrey Matthews, kindest and wisest of Shelley scholars, who has done so much to foster the Shelley revival in Britain.

D. K.

FARNHAM, *March* 1983

MAP OF BRITAIN

Showing places associated with Shelley

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I

DISJOINTED VISIONS

Full of great aims and bent on bold emprise.
THOMSON, *Castle of Indolence*

1

IN 1792 the old Sussex family of Shelley had known respectability and occasional distinction for over 400 years, and another name seemed likely to be added to the roll of worthy country gentlemen when in the junior branch of the family a son and heir, Percy Bysshe Shelley, was born on the fourth of August. His birthplace, where he lived for nineteen of his thirty years, was a country house two miles north-west of Horsham, Field Place in the parish of Warnham. There his father, Timothy Shelley, had settled in 1791 after marrying Elizabeth Pilfold. Field Place still stands much as it was then, a solid homely mansion built and roofed with the rough grey Horsham stone, which after brief weathering begins to look like the lichen-coated natural outcrop. To the south and west of the house, beyond a ha-ha, lies the landscaped park, with two lakes cut in the clay and a variety of trees — cedar, cypress, pine, oak and chestnut — planted singly, or arranged in clumps and avenues. A splash of brighter colour is provided by the flower gardens, for which Field Place is now most famous.[1] Hidden glades, soft turf, flowers, pleasing vistas across the park, vivid reflexions of house, trees and clouds in the sheltered lakes — all combine to make Field Place a rare delight on a summer's day.

1792 was a year of upheaval and shifting loyalties. Before the baby Shelley was a week old the French monarchy was virtually ended when the mob stormed the palace of

the Tuileries, and the September massacres which followed were 'a most heart-breaking event'[2] for Englishmen like Fox who had looked kindly on the Revolution. In England, too, revolutionary fever was spreading, and Pitt was soon to begin his repression of the radicals, which culminated in the trial of the twelve reformers in 1794.

In Parliament this was the period when the Whigs were hopelessly split. Between 1784 and 1830 they were in office for only fourteen months —

> Nought's permanent among the human race,
> Except the Whigs *not* getting into place.[3]

To the Shelleys, this situation was of more than academic interest, for the poet's father, Timothy Shelley (1753–1844), and grandfather, Bysshe Shelley (1731–1815), were both dabbling in politics as Whigs, under the wing of the Duke of Norfolk, a close ally of Fox and a notorious borough-monger. In the 1790 election the Duke decided to try his luck in the borough of Horsham, with Timothy Shelley as his candidate. His method was to buy property, for some of which he had to pay ten times the usual price, and to install as chief poll-clerk his steward, Timothy's cousin Mr Medwin. Timothy was duly elected, because the poll-clerk disqualified enough of the opposing voters. But the trickery was too obvious, and Timothy was unseated in 1792 when a charge of corrupt practices was proved.[4] After a decent interval he reappeared in the House of Commons as member for New Shoreham, which he represented from 1802 till 1818. While the short-lived 'Ministry of all the Talents' was in power in 1806 his family's services to the party were rewarded: Bysshe received a baronetcy to which Timothy succeeded in 1815.[5]

As Timothy's son grew up he no doubt heard much talk of politics, but the stories of his childhood give no hint either of this or of the later quarrels with his father. As far as we can tell, his early years were serene and happy. He enjoyed leading his four younger sisters in imaginative games or telling them of strange monsters like the Great

Tortoise of Warnham Pond. His sister Hellen remembered him as gentle, considerate and 'full of cheerful fun'.[6] Until he was 10 he had daily lessons from the Vicar of Warnham, for his father wanted him to be 'a good and Gentlemanly Scholar'.[7] Soon, to the credit of his tutor, he was the proud author of some poems and a play. Their printing was paid for by his grandfather, then living in a humble cottage at Horsham, after having built, near Worthing, the grandiose Castle Goring, a strange hybrid of Gothic and Palladian architecture. Old Bysshe took a fancy to his grandson, perhaps because he saw gleams of his own eccentricity emerging. Timothy was more concerned with grooming his son as Squire of Field Place: the boy liked making the round of the tenants, but hunting and shooting were less to his taste.

Then in 1802 he was sent away to school. So far, life had been sheltered and unexacting: the rough-and-tumble and the new code of behaviour baffled him, and he retired into his shell. The school, Syon House Academy, Brentford, was perhaps not the most suitable for a young sprig of the aristocracy, for many of the boys were tradesmen's sons, and a touch of class warfare may have been added to the usual brutality. But the very idea of physical tyranny, no matter whether exercised by masters or boys, was enough to harden his innate anti-social traits. He was a confirmed rebel by the time he left Syon House for Eton, in 1804, and he showed it by staging a demonstration against Eton's fagging system. The boys, quick to recognize such oddity, made him a butt for 'baiting'. The Eton cloisters would ring with his name as his schoolmates closed in on him, knocking books from under his arm and indulging in the petty cruelties characteristic of schoolboys *en masse*. Eton taught him what to expect in the wider world, showing in miniature how a group treats a member who tries to discredit its accepted values, even if for the group's ultimate benefit. At Eton, as later, his reply was to withdraw from the fray and wander alone reading.

Though small-scale conflicts like these meant more to

Shelley than wars between nations, it is well to remember that the threat of invasion hung over England during his schooldays. His father's constituency on the Sussex coast, the port of New Shoreham, was an attractive landing point, and Field Place was only seventeen miles inland. So the Shelleys had as much reason as anyone to worry about Napoleon's plans. The battle of Trafalgar put an end to fears of invasion, and Shelley, then 13, no doubt gained some reflected glory at school: for H.M.S. *Ajax*, of seventy-four guns, seventh ship in the battle-line led by the *Victory*, was under the command of his uncle, John Pilfold. Trafalgar came in Shelley's second year at Eton and it was in his fifth year there that Wellington assumed command in the Peninsula.

What Shelley learnt at Eton was not entirely what his teachers intended. He did acquire a thorough grounding in classics, being particularly facile in Latin verse, but he was attracted most by subjects on the fringe of the curriculum. At both Syon House and Eton regular lectures on science were given by Adam Walker, a self-taught encyclopaedist, who knew how to rouse the boys' imagination by concentrating on the 'marvels of science' and speculating boldly when facts failed. No one was keener than Shelley in privately extending Walker's experiments to dangerous extremes. He gave his tutor a severe shock with an electrical machine. He flew fire-balloons. He made a steam engine, which blew up. Gunpowder was his familiar, and he poisoned himself with chemicals. At home, too, his 'hands and clothes were constantly stained and corroded with acid'.[8] He passed easily from bizarre scientific experiment to the raising of ghosts at midnight and vigils in deserted graveyards. These Faustian goings-on hardly deserve to be called psychical research; they were inspired more by the 'Gothic' mystery stories, which Shelley began reading at Syon House. All this would hardly have been approved by his headmasters, Dr Goodall, a genial scholar who lived up to his name, and his successor Dr Keate, the most famous of Eton headmasters, whose mass floggings have now a legendary air.

The spark that fired Shelley's imagination came not from Eton but from outside: first, as we have seen, from Adam Walker, and later from Dr James Lind (1736–1812), who lived only a mile away, in Windsor. Lind, who should not be confused with his more famous namesake (1716–94), the conqueror of scurvy, was a scientist and a traveller: after studying medicine at Edinburgh he visited China as a naval surgeon in the 1760s, and in 1772 went on a scientific expedition to Iceland with Sir Joseph Banks. In 1777 Lind became a Fellow of the Royal Society and physician to the Royal Household at Windsor. He was also skilled in astronomy, and was friendly with Sir William Herschel, the greatest of observational astronomers, whose observatory was nearby at Slough. Until he left Scotland in 1765, Lind had been a close friend of James Watt and had eagerly followed Watt's progress with his improved steam engine. Lind kept up his interest in technology, and his cousin James Keir was one of the pioneers of the chemical industry.

Shelley was influenced more deeply by Lind than by anyone else he met, because Lind shaped his mind in its most impressionable years.[9] How did Lind gain this hold over Shelley? He was in touch with the leading men of science in the country and made Shelley himself feel almost one of that magic circle. Lind was over seventy, white-haired, tall and extremely thin — the very model of a sage, to a schoolboy nurtured on Gothic stories. And, even more important for Shelley, he was a sage who encouraged rebellious attitudes; for Lind himself was regarded as 'eccentric' — a polite way of saying that he was a radical in the Royal Household. He had his own printing press, and was suspected of issuing subversive pamphlets. On top of all this, Lind was kind and patient with Shelley: 'he was exactly what an old man ought to be, free, calm-spirited, full of benevolence, and even of youthful ardour. . . . I shall never forget our long talks. . . .'[10] In those long talks during his last year at Eton, the writings of Godwin and Erasmus Darwin were no doubt discussed, and Shelley's mind was being primed with the explosive ideas which were to propel him vigorously

though erratically through the twelve remaining years of his life.

2

Shelley's fame springs from the poems he wrote in Italy during his last four years, 1818–22. Before that, from 1812 to 1818, came the years of trial and, more often than not, error, with only a few short poems which succeed completely. Before 1812 his writings are worth little artistically: but they are worth mentioning, because they reveal nakedly the enthusiasms animating Shelley's meteoric career.

Shelley's first solid literary works were two novels in the Gothic style, *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne; or, The Rosicrucian*, both written before he left Eton, when he was 16 or 17. In a Gothic novel it was customary for inscrutable characters in the grip of strong passions to play out a melodrama amid background scenery designed to heighten the mystery and horror. Shelley mastered the Gothic technique only too well, and his novels are very horrid indeed. *Zastrozzi* is much the better of the two. The stock situations of the plot are neatly strung together, and there are few pauses in the action because the characters feel so intensely —

> Her passions were now wound up to the highest pitch of desperation. In indescribable agony of mind, she dashed her head against the floor — she imprecated a thousand curses upon Julia, and swore eternal revenge.

The scenery is worthy of such passions:

> On the right, the thick umbrage of the forest trees rendered undistinguishable anyone who might lurk *there*; on the left, a frightful precipice yawned, at whose base a deafening cataract dashed with tumultuous violence. . . .

Matilda, the headstrong heroine, is desperately in love with Verezzi, who, though quite inoffensive, persists in loving someone else, Julia. So Matilda, aided by her mysterious

henchman Zastrozzi, plans a gory end for Julia. The climax comes when Matilda and Julia meet face to face:

'Die! detested wretch,' exclaimed Matilda, in a paroxysm of rage, as she violently attempted to bathe the stiletto in the life-blood of her rival; but Julia starting aside, the weapon slightly wounded her neck, and the ensanguined stream stained her alabaster bosom.[11]

Financially *Zastrozzi* was Shelley's most successful work: he is said to have been paid £40 for it. Nor were the reviews entirely damning. The *Gentleman's Magazine* thought it 'a short but well-told tale of horror, and, if we do not mistake, not from an ordinary pen'.[12] If *Zastrozzi* is almost readable, *St. Irvyne* is quite unreadable. Its preposterous unfinished plot is an insult no reader would tolerate.

Shelley's novels must be judged among other products of the Gothic convention, not by any high external standards. In his day the leading Gothic novelists were M. G. Lewis, whose most spectacular success was *The Monk* (1795), and Mrs Anne Radcliffe, now best remembered for her *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). Lewis was expert at cloaking sadism and sexual titillation in polite phrases, whereas Mrs Radcliffe did not usually go beyond the more respectable horrors like highway robbery, dank dungeons, spectres and secret passages. Shelley's style is half-way between Lewis and Mrs Radcliffe, and he borrows freely from *Zofloya, or the Moor* (1806), by 'Rosa Matilda'. It would be easy to write off Shelley's novels as trash. Yet *Zastrozzi* is no worse than many of the Gothic tales. And Shelley knew the style was absurd: that is why he left *St. Irvyne* unfinished.[13]

Gothic themes dominated much of his verse too at this time. His sister Elizabeth collaborated with him in *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire*, printed at Worthing in 1810. The adjective *Original* was probably a boyish prank, for one poem was stolen from Lewis's *Tales of Terror*, and another, *Ghasta, or the Avenging Demon!!!*, has a verse lifted from Chatterton's *Aella* and a line from *The Monk* to help it towards this grisly climax:

Thunder shakes th' expansive sky,
Shakes the bosom of the heath,
'Mortal! Mortal! thou must die' —
The warrior sank convulsed in death.

856. 197-200*

Shelley was fascinated by the legend of the Wandering Jew who, because he taunted Christ on the way to Calvary, was doomed to roam the earth until the second coming, with a branded cross on his forehead. *The Wandering Jew* is the title of Shelley's first long poem, written in 1810, possibly with help from his cousin Tom Medwin. The young author (or authors), impressed by Scott's success with *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) and *Marmion* (1808), chose a narrative form and made free with Scott's techniques. Though no doubt pleased by the Gothic touches in Scott's poems, Shelley disapproved of his aristocratic tone, and Scott's influence is evident only in this early poem. *The Wandering Jew* is occasionally quite professional, as in the lines

yon abbey's tower,
Which lifts its ivy-mantled mass so high,
Rears its dark head to meet the storms that lour,
And braves the trackless tempests of the sky,[14]

though echoes of Gray and Marlowe can be heard. But most of the poem is cheap Gothic frippery, with plenty of thick rheumy gore, hideous screams, strong convulsions and loud-yelling demons. Shelley never again attempted an ambitious poem in the Gothic style: *The Wandering Jew* convinced him of its futility. Having supp'd full with horrors he was ready for more wholesome food.

The cult of the Gothic which so enthralled the young Shelley was a decadent end-product of a revolution in sensibility which began early in the eighteenth century when the landscape garden began to oust the formal garden. With the landscape garden came a taste for the 'picturesque'; the tame-

* Numbers after verse quotations indicate page and line numbers in Hutchinson's Oxford edition of *Shelley's Poetical Works*, or the paperback version, as corrected by G. M. Matthews (1970), which has the same page and line numbers.