THE QUEST FOR THE HERON-ALLEN SOCIETY

A TALK DELIVERED BY

TIMOTHY J. McCANN

AT THE FIRST EDWARD HERON-ALLEN SYMPOSIUM, CHICHESTER, JULY 2001

Opusculum III

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This edition published by the Heron-Allen Society, c/o West Sussex Record Office, County Hall, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 1RN.

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30

Timothy J. McCann

Cover photograph:
Edward Heron-Allen outside Large Acres

THE QUEST FOR THE HERON-ALLEN SOCIETY

Edward Heron-Allen purchased an estate called Large Acres in Selsey and designed and built a substantial house there in the years 1906 and 1907. Many distinguished persons in the various fields that occupied his wide-ranging interests stayed there as house-guests with Heron-Allen, his second wife Edith (known as Nour or Mint) and their two daughters Itha and Armorel. Among them, and among those who contributed to the lovingly preserved Large Acres Visitors Books, was A.J.A. Symons, author of the near legendary *The Quest for Corvo*. I was therefore tempted to entitle my introductory remarks for this inaugural symposium of the Heron-Allen Society "The Quest for Heron Allen", but, on further reflection, I decided to call it "The Quest for the Heron-Allen Society".

In the summer of 1991 I took a cottage at Kuggar on the Lizard in Cornwall with my wife and son. On the day we arrived, I read *The Times* as usual, and noticed in the *Saturday Review* an article by Jan Morris on her favourite books and, in particular, on the messages of previous owners written inside them. She concluded with a passage which had far reaching results, and I will read it to you:

"Nevertheless, the most thoroughly personalised book in the library, and the one that will give most pleasure to my great-grandchildren, I do not doubt, is nothing to do with me. It is the copy of Augustus Hare's Venice which Edward and Marianna Heron-Allen bought during their visit to Venice in the Spring of 1895. When they came home again they had this volume grangerised – rebound, that is, to incorporate photographs and mementos of their own – and so made of it a sweet and permanent encapsulation of their delight. The tout from the Testolini glassworks gave

them a map when they got off the train, so they bound that in at the beginning. They found two four-leaved clovers somewhere, and pressed them opposite page 99. A snapshot of a disconsolate man sitting on the steps of a bridge is wittily captioned, "my wife is shopping". A boatload of flowery-hatted ladies and boatered gents pulls alongside at Our Steps. There is a photograph of a Temperance Drink Stall on the Riva degli Schiavoni, and to make up for it one of a drunk flat out at the feet of the Goldoni statue. Best of all, there are the pictures that the couple took of each other, Mr. H-A suave with his pipe, cane and rakish hat on the steps of the Piazza flagstaff, Mrs. H-A windswept and demure on the Lido sands, or draped more elegantly over the balustrade of Our Terrace.

I love the book. I bless the Heron-Allens whoever they were, for projecting the pleasure of their days in Venice so intimately through this medium down to me and my progeny. I bought it in Brighton, I see, in 1959, for 15 shillings (slight foxing in end-papers).

Well, in Cornwall I was away from my books, but nonetheless I wrote to Jan Morris immediately, telling her who Edward and Marianna Heron-Allen were. Anyone who described his recreations in *Who's Who* as: "Persian literature; Marine Zoology; Meteorology; Heraldry; Bibliography; Occasional Essays and Scientific Romances; Auricula and Asparagus Culture" and boasted the telephone number: Selsey 1, was surely worth being remembered. In 1991 I had already been working in the Record Office here in Chichester for nearly twenty-five years, and during all that time I had been familiar with our collection of Heron-Allen material grangerised or rebound in those dark red volumes which had been a staple diet for local historians. For when Heron-Allen chose Selsey as his country retreat for the good of his daughter's health, and designed and built Large Acres in 1906 and 1907, he immediately began collecting everything he came across relating to his chosen parish.

Vyvyan Holland, Oscar Wilde's younger son, who often stayed at Large Acres, wrote that what most attracted him to Heron-Allen was "his love of collecting things. Apart from his collection of books, which interested him most, he also collected old English silver, glass, china,

musical instruments, seals, walking sticks, precious stones and stamps". To that we can add scarabs, as we shall hear later on this morning from Liza Wood. Heron-Allen wrote to Joseph Cushman, the American foraminiferist, to say that he "collected stamps, but only Egypt and current English". Finally we can add local history ephemera. The seven books of Selseyana, beautifully bound in a reddy-brown cloth, with the bookplate of Heron-Allen and Edith his second wife, and presented to the Record Office in 1958 by Miss Stanley-Wrench, contain for the years 1906 to 1937 a rich collection of newspaper cuttings, posters, programmes, sale particulars, catalogues, annual reports, notices, timetables, postcards, photographs, railway tickets and invitations. They not only chronicle the history of Selsey and its people but also tell us a great deal about Heron-Allen himself and his life in the community.

One of the first things Heron-Allen did when he started to develop his property at Large Acres was to set up a meteorological station, and the meteorological records he kept from 1908 to 1923 are also among the collection in the Record Office. He then set about writing the history of Selsey. In this he was greatly helped by the researches of then vicar of Selsey John Cavis-Brown, who had been collecting material for several years and intended to write a history of the whole peninsula. Heron-Allen had already promised to co-operate with Cavis-Brown on the scientific and pre-historic part of the history, and when the Vicar died in 1909, Mrs. Cavis-Bown presented his unfinished work and all the material her husband had collected to Heron-Allen. Co-ordinating his own researches, Cavis-Brown's notes and Mary Salmon's researches in the British Library and the Public Record Office, Heron-Allen published his monumental 400 page *Selsey Bill: Historic and Prehistoric* in 1911. Concerned that his erudition might get in the way of the popular reception of his book, Heron-Allen wrote that: "I have borne in mind the 'horrible example' of the schoolmaster who, when he wished to say to the boys, 'do not laugh quite so loudly', remarked with simple eloquence, 'Young gentlemen, when inclined to risibility, let your cachinnation be like the coruscations of aestival electricity – lambent, but innocuous'."

Six volumes of miscellanea relating to his history of Selsey, compiled

by Heron-Allen, and containing his notes, photographs of many of the documents and artifacts that he used; his correspondence with fellow scientists, archaeologists and antiquarians; and another fine selection of postcards, were presented to the Record Office by Lindsay Fleming in 1957. Lindsay Fleming, a fellow antiquarian and the historian of Pagham, had purchased them at the sale of Heron-Allen's library in 1957.

His interest in the archaeology and history of Selsey, as well as its foraminifera, was to last for the rest of Heron-Allen's life. In the years immediately following the publication of his magnum opus he published a lecture on *Nature and History at Selsey Bill*, which he delivered in Chichester and in London, and the *Visitors Map and Guide to Selsey*. Then, in the 30s, he published his *Guide to the Parish Church of St. Peter on Selsey Bill.* In 1912 he became the local secretary of the Sussex Archaeological Society and in the pages of its transactions he published articles on some Roman imperial coins found at Selsey in 1909, and a series of other finds over the next thirty years, on the Selsey map of 1672, and the Selsey Volunteers. Towards the end of his life in partnership with Harriet James he published articles in *Sussex County Magazine* on subjects as various as Treasure Trove in Selsey, the Sussex Martlets, the Long Man of Wilmington, Ecclesioclasm in Sussex and the early Chichester Guide books. But he was not just a writer on archaeological subjects. Together with Claude Bishop of Norton Priory and L.F. Salzman, the editor of *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, Heron-Allen took part in the excavations of the Mound at Church Norton and correctly maintained until the end of his life that it was the real site of Selsey Cathedral.

Heron-Allen was not just the chronicler of the history and archaeology of Selsey, he also played an active role in his local community. He was a major shareholder in, and for many years Chairman of, the Hundred of Manhood and Selsey Tramway Company, popularly known as "The Selsey Tram". In 1911 he became Commissioner of Boy Scouts for West Sussex at the request of Sir Robert Baden-Powell (and by special permission of Baden-Powell he was allowed to wear his trade-mark black uniform), and continued to

hold the post until the end of the First World War. At the outbreak of war in 1914 he organised Scout Patrols of the Sussex coast and raised and equipped a large troop from Selsey. In 1917 he also became a District Commissioner for National Service for South-West Sussex.

As well as knowing the local history material in the Record Office, which, over the years, I had produced for numerous researchers, I was aware of some other of Heron-Allen's interests. I had read his letters to Oscar Wilde in the collected edition of Wilde's correspondence, recently edited by Merlin Holland, Oscar Wilde's grandson, and an early member of the Heron-Allen Society, and understood that he practised palmistry. I had seen some of his articles on foraminifera in Selsey in the Record Office Library. I knew of his translation of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, from my own knowledge of Baron Corvo. And I understood that he was an authority on the violin and violinists. Only a couple of years before, I had been approached by Richard Hodgkinson of the Natural History Museum in Cromwell Road, who was writing an article on the fruits of the 25-year scientific partnership between Heron-Allen and Arthur Earland, the type slide collection of foraminifera. Heron-Allen presented the collection to the Natural History Museum between 1926 and his death in 1943. Richard Hodgkinson's article in the *Journal of Micropalaentology* in December 1989 describes the collection and assesses its importance as a national collection, and, for the first time, alerted me to Heron-Allen's importance in the scientific rather than the historical, literary or musical world.

Thus Heron-Allen was fresh in my mind when I read Jan Morris's article, because only a fortnight earlier I had been asked to deliver a lecture on eighteenth-century printing in Chichester at the British Book Trade Index 9th annual seminar held at the University of Reading. In my preparation for the lecture I had read the article Heron-Allen wrote together with Harriet James on the early Chichester Guides in *Sussex County Magazine* of 1940, and I had read his correspondence on the subject with his fellow antiquarian Captain A.W.F. Fuller, that we have here in the Record Office. Later on, I discovered the extent of Heron-Allen's interest in the subject when I read his correspondence with

John Johnstone of the Oxford University Press, now in the Bodleian Library. Johnstone was trying to set up a museum of printing history in the Clarendon Building and Heron-Allen sent him bus tickets, stamps, uncut quills, fruit papers and various albums from his collection at Large Acres. Truly Heron-Allen was a magpie of extraordinary thoroughness.

So I sat down in our cottage in Kuggar and wrote to Jan Morris to tell her who I thought Heron Allen and his wife Marianna were. I didn't really expect to hear anything, and for several weeks there was silence. Then a letter arrived at our house in Havant from Jan Morris. She had initially replied to our holiday cottage and the letter had been returned to her. Eventually she wrote to my home address and told me that "heaps of people had written to her about different aspects of the polymathic Heron-Allen and his family, but nobody else has told me that he grangerised most of his books. How lavish!". This reminded me of Vyvyan Holland's story that Heron-Allen had "built a large library on to the existing house" at Large Acres, and "he was inordinately proud of his library, but he had fallen into the trap which so many book lovers fall into and had all his first editions expensively bound in leather, thereby ruining their value as first editions". Jan Morris's article was the first ripple on the pond, whose waves eventually led to the flotation of our society.

In December 1992 I received a letter from Professor Brian Harvey. He was then researching a book, entitled *The Violin Family and its Makers in the British Isles*, which has now been published by Oxford University Press, and which naturally had a substantial section on Edward Heron-Allen. He had come to Heron-Allen as a student of the violin, and was seeking advice on his standing as a scientist. He had been given my address by Jan Morris. I replied telling him what I knew about the man, about the collection of his papers here in the Record Office and about the few other people who had expressed an interest in Heron-Allen. I also ventured the suggestion that he was worthy of a biography and why not in 1993, the fiftieth anniversary of his death.

How little did I know what was to come!

At that time, I knew nothing at all about what had happened to his family after Heron-Allen's death in 1943, and, in spite of acquiring our own collection of documents relating to him largely from people such as the antiquarians Captain Fuller and Lindsay Fleming who had bought lots at the various sales in 1943 and 1957, we had no contact with any of his descendants. However, one result of Jan Morris's article was to put Brian Harvey and Ivor Jones in touch with each other. Ivor, of course, is the grandson of Heron-Allen, our speaker this morning, the keeper of the flame in Heron-Allen studies and the driving force behind our gathering here today, but that is to anticipate our story. As a result of meeting Ivor, Brian Harvey was shown Heron-Allen's wartime journal and conceived the idea of editing it for publication. There were a few meetings down here in Chichester, where, together with Peter Wilkinson, Ivor and I met Brian's wife and fellow editor Carol, and I am delighted to say that the diary will be published jointly by the Sussex Record Society as volume in their series, and Phillimores of Chichester, and will be launched at our second annual Heron-Allen symposium in July next year, when they will give a joint talk on the War Journal.

Quite unknown to us, other enthusiasts were beginning to bring back Heron-Allen's writing into the public domain.

In 1979 The Octagon Press, an Islamic Press in London, reprinted *A Fool of God. The Mystical Verses of Baba Tahir*, Heron-Allen's translation of a Persian classic from an almost unknown dialect known as Luri. Then Ray Russell, who is the proprietor of the Tartarus Press, entered the scene. Originally based at Horam in East Sussex, and now at Carlton in Coverdale at Leyburn in North Yorkshire, the Tartarus Press publishes a series of beautifully produced out of print works with an emphasis on fantasy fiction. I am the proud possessor of Ray's own translation of Alain Fournier's *Le Grand Meulnes*, his edition of M.P. Shiel of Horsham's *Shapes in the Fire*, and I am looking forward to the forthcoming biography of Denton Welch, who wrote that precocious diary of a journey through Sussex – *I Left my Grandfather's Village*.

Ray first produced a limited edition of Heron Allen's *Cheetah Girl*, a short story once deemed so indecent that it did not appear as planned

in the *Selected Strange Papers of Christopher Blayre*, but instead appeared in an edition of only twenty copies, and has since become one of the great bibliographic rarities. Ray's new edition quickly sold out. Then, in 1998 he published *The Collected Strange Papers of Christopher Blayre*, bringing together the short stories that Heron-Allen published in *The Purple Sapphire* (1921), *The Strange Papers of Christopher Blayre* (1932) and *Some Women of the University* (1934) and including *Cheetah Girl*. This volume too quickly went out of print, but Ray kindly promised to bring down a few copies with him to our first annual symposium, and it is a major disappointment that at the last minute he was unable to join us today.

Inevitably, Ray Russell and Ivor Jones met each other. Many moons ago, as he described it to me, Brian Harvey suggested to Ivor the idea of a Heron-Allen Society, and the idea was taken forward by the meeting between Ivor and Ray. The problem they found was not a lack of interest or enthusiasm but the very breadth of Heron-Allen's interests. As Jan Morris said in her letter to me: "heaps of people have written to me about different aspects of the polymathic Heron-Allen", or as Brian Harvey put it: "violin aficionados might not find much in common with fantasy fiction lovers or foraminiferists or local historians. What sort of person would feel confident about undertaking a biography of such a man?". Brian, who had bravely agreed to produce an account of Heron-Allen for the new *Dictionary of National Biography*, suggested that a lunch of interested parties might be a way forward.

The Record Office had already played host to a couple of meetings when we were trying to find a publisher for the Harveys' edition of Heron-Allen's War Diary, so when Ivor telephoned me and suggested a meeting of interested parties, with the consent of Richard Childs, the County Archivist, I offered the hospitality of the Record Office Library for our inaugural meeting. We met here in the Record Office on 5 June last year, founded the Heron-Allen Society, and agreed that the objectives of the Society should be to study and record all aspects of the life and interests of Edward Heron-Allen and to promote his work. It was further agreed that the Society should encourage the publication of biographical material, perhaps first in separate studies

relating to his different interests, with the final target of a complete biography.

We decided to have a regular meeting, perhaps once a year, at which we would promote talks on aspects of his activities, and that where possible these talks would be published and distributed to members, and form part of our biographical project. We agreed to produce a newsletter annually. We agreed that archive material relating to Edward Heron-Allen and his family should be collected and preserved here in the West Sussex Record Office, where it will be added to our existing Heron-Allen collections and be catalogued and made available to members. We then fixed a subscription for £10, elected officers and adjourned for a well-earned and highly enjoyable lunch.

Well that was the start. What have we achieved in the year since then? Ivor has edited and Ray printed, for the Tartarus Press, *Notes upon the Literary, Scientific, and Artistic Activities of Edward Heron-Allen FRS* by Christopher Blayre as Opusculum 1 of the Heron-Allen Society (Christopher Blayre being one, and the most common one, of Heron-Allen's many pseudonyms). Ray Russell has published *The Princess Daphne*, Heron-Allen's novel, written with the enigmatic Selina Dolaro, which is an unconventional love-story set in the London of the late nineteenth century, which is often described as a novel of psychic vampirism but is really a study of mesmerism and doppelgangers. Ray intended to launch the volume at the Symposium this morning, but, as I mentioned, he is unable to be with us, and has not sent down any copies because he has had serious trouble with his printers which drastically affected his print run.

The indefatigable Ivor has also visited the Heron-Allen Room at the Natural History Museum in Cromwell Road, London, which looks after the type slide collection of foraminifera collected during their 25 year scientific partnership by Heron-Allen and Arthur Earland, as well as other collections such as the Challenger Collection, the Sidall and Millett collections and the papers of J.J. Lister, all of which he helped to catalogue. Dr. Whittaker, from the Natural History Museum, and Clive Jones, who are both here with us this morning, have been extremely generous with their knowledge and their enthusiasm. Dr.

Whittaker has told me all about the Heron-Allen Room at Cromwell Road and all the Heron-Allen treasures that it contains, has generously sent me photographs of the painting of Heron-Allen by Winifred Hardman and the photograph taken by Russell of Chichester and sent to Joseph Cushman in America, and has brought with him the original of the Purple Sapphire to be displayed during our symposium. You remember the Purple Sapphire, the subject of Heron-Allen's first short story in the collection of stories that bears its name, and the stone which brings a horrible death to everyone that owns it. The photographs of the painting and the Russell photograph are displayed in the exhibition.

Jennifer Jett from the Department of Paleobiology at the National Museum of Natural History, the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC, kindly sent me copies of the correspondence between Heron-Allen and Joseph Cushman about foraminifera, as well as the letters from Arthur Earland to Cushman chronicling the break-up of the Heron-Allen/Earland partnership, from their collection. The Librarian of the Royal College of Music telephoned me about the Heron-Allen collection devoted to the violin and its history and promised to revive the catalogue as a priority now that there were people who were likely to consult it again. Merlin Holland, whose father was one of the most regular visitors to Large Acres, and who has continued the friendship between the Wilde family and the Heron-Allen family to a third generation, edited his monumental edition of the letters of Oscar Wilde, which included five letters from Heron-Allen, two of which were published for the first time. People from Selsey, alerted by the publicity generated by the Society, have kindly loaned items for the exhibition and allowed us to copy items to add to our collections here in the Record Office. One benefactor purchased the plans of Large Acres together with part of Heron-Allen's map collection at an auction in Oxford in the 1950s and kindly allowed me to scan copies, some of which are mounted on the walls in the exhibition, while another (Pat Burley) has loaned us the delightful oil painting of Itha as a young woman and the head and shoulders portrait of Armorel, Heron-Allen's two daughters, which are hanging on the wall to my right. I have

produced the first Newsletter of the Heron-Allen Society, of which copies are available here at the Symposium this morning.

Finally, we have arranged this inaugural Heron-Allen Symposium this morning. I hope I have introduced you to some of the members of the Society and their interests and activities. Of course I have not mentioned all of the Heron-Allen's family, descended from Itha, who are with us here this morning. One of whom, Pat Coleby, well-known at home as the author of books on the medical care of animals, has travelled all the way from Australia, while another, Liza Wood, will be speaking to us shortly about Heron-Allen's remarkable collection of scarabs. Nor have I mentioned all of our Society members, at least one of whom, Joan Navarre, author of *The Publishing History of Aubrey Beardsley's Compositions for Oscar Wilde's Salome*, has come all the way from Milwaukee in the United States to join us this morning. But so far as I am concerned the quest for the Heron-Allen Society is truly launched. The rest is up to all of you. If you join the Society and support our work on Heron-Allen, if you purchase the publications that are beginning to make Heron-Allen's name known again, if you contribute to our Newsletter and help build up our collection of Heron-Allen material in the Record Office, then we can fulfil our objectives and work towards a comprehensive biography. If you do not, then Heron-Allen will return to the obscurity he has enjoyed for most of the last fifty years and will be known only to a few eccentric enthusiasts, such as myself. The choice is yours.

Opusculum I *Notes upon the Literary, Scientific, and Artistic Activities of Edward Heron-Allen, F.R.S.*, Extracted from his Diaries and other Documents by Christopher Blayre (2000).

Opusculum II *Edward Heron-Allen.* A Talk delivered by his grandson Ivor E. Jones at the first Edward Heron-Allen symposium, Chichester, July 2001 (2001).

Opusculum III *The Quest for the Heron-Allen Society.* A Talk delivered at the first Heron-Allen symposium, Chichester, July 2001, by Timothy J. McCann (2002).