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‘Unashamedly personal in its approach, [this biography] grew out of a “lifelong pleasure” in all aspects of Lear’s work, and it is Levi’s sheer enthusiasm for his subject that is his book’s principal strength.’

Peter Parker, *New York Times*

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EDWARD LEAR

A Life

Peter Levi

Foreword by Robin Hanbury-Tenison



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For my dear Love

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How Pleasant to Know Mr Lear



How pleasant to know Mr Lear!
Who has written such volumes of stuff!
Some think him ill-tempered and queer,
But a few think him pleasant enough.

His mind is concrete and fastidious,
His nose is remarkably big;
His visage is more or less hideous,
His beard it resembles a wig.

He has ears, and two eyes, and ten fingers,
Leastways if you reckon two thumbs;
Long ago he was one of the singers,
But now he is one of the dumbs.

He sits in a beautiful parlour,
With hundreds of books on the wall;
He drinks a great deal of Marsala,
But never gets tipsy at all.

He has many friends, laymen and clerical;
Old Foss is the name of his cat;
His body is perfectly spherical,
He weareth a runcible hat.

When he walks in a waterproof white,
The children run after him so!
Calling out, 'He's come out in his night-
Gown, that crazy old Englishman, oh!'

He weeps by the side of the ocean,
 He weeps on the top of the hill;
He purchases pancakes and lotion,
 And chocolate shrimps from the mill.

He reads but he cannot speak Spanish,
 He cannot abide ginger-beer:
Ere the days of his pilgrimage vanish,
 How pleasant to know Mr Lear!

Foreword



MAY 12, 2012 was the 200th anniversary of the birth of Edward Lear, one of the most brilliant and yet most ill-appreciated of Englishmen, both in his lifetime and since. Most know him as the writer of nonsense verse, a poetry form he virtually invented, but there was so much more to him. It is fitting that Peter Levi's learned and, like its subject, eccentric and highly entertaining biography is being re-issued now.

Lear did not come into my life in a major way until 2006 when my wife, Louella, and I rode the length of Albania and I wrote a book about that interesting and little known-country.¹

The two most famous early travellers to Albania were Lord Byron at the start of the nineteenth century, and Edward Lear in the middle. Lear's peregrinations there and throughout the Balkans were extensive and the pictures he painted of exotic landscapes were and remain the finest and most evocative images of that part of the world. The research I did for my book gave me an inkling of what an extraordinarily talented and diverse man Lear was. Levi's book reveals him in all his multi-faceted, witty and tortured glory. There was so much more to him than the nonsense verse we were all, if we were lucky, brought up on and which touches in its extreme oddity so many nerves. The risible humour is unique in its ability to strike a chord with our own hopes and fears, weaknesses and sadness. Who has not identified him or herself as the Owl or the Pussycat, floundering through the turbulent ocean of life? However, it is as a travel writer, poet, cartoonist, zoological artist and above all as a landscape painter that he should really be remembered.

1. *Land of Eagles*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2009.

He was a man of innumerable gifts, yet tortured throughout his life by ill health and feelings of inadequacy, while constantly living in fear of debt, for which his father seems to have gone to prison. And yet he rose above repeated adversities, deprecating his own failings, such as his hopeless horsemanship, in such endearing ways that he must have been a delight to know. There is a probably apocryphal story, told to me by a British nobleman, whose grandfather had known Lear, which supposedly accounts for his children's verse. It was Lord Stanley, later the 14th Earl of Derby, who originally paid Lear, a fine ornithological draughtsman, to draw his aviary at Knowsley Hall. While he was showing his patrons his work, lunchtime arrived and there was an embarrassing moment deciding where the artist should eat. He could not be sent downstairs to the servants' hall and yet he was not quite a gentleman and so could not dine with his hosts. 'I know' Lady Stanley is reputed to have said. 'He can go up to the nursery. The children seem to like him!' And so his best-known talent of creating nonsense rhymes was honed as he enchanted the children and painted captive parrots.

While riding through Albania we found his lyrical descriptions of the countryside as valid as when he had written about it over a hundred and fifty years before. When waking chilled in our sleeping bags after a wet and foggy night, Lear's view of 'a very mistiferous morning' with 'the cold-Cumberland feeling of these mountains after rain' could hardly have been bettered. We were impressed, too, by his great fortitude under appallingly uncomfortable travelling conditions, some of which we found can still be experienced today, but there seem to be fewer fleas and less hostility now.

Lear was a man of very many and diverse friendships. He lived in a time of great creativity, of which he was a part and yet never fully integrated into any group. He was overawed by the pre-Raphaelites, especially Holman Hunt, but fortunately their different attitude to art did not diminish his own great talent as a landscape painter. He helped the great bird painter, John Gould, with the backgrounds and some of the details of his pictures, but he never quite achieved Gould's fame in that field. He was greatly entertained by Marianne North, the superb self-taught botanical artist, who travelled the world recording exotic plants and he loved her paintings, as well as, perhaps, her but he never married. He painted Richard Burton in full Arab disguise in Egypt, soon after Burton's return from Mecca, although they seem not to have met again. This was an era simply fizzing with creativity of all sorts. Engineers like I.K. Brunel were in their prime and changing the face of Britain. Lear

seems to have known everyone and yet still been an outsider. Charles Kingsley loved his limericks and the lyrics of his nonsense verse. Lord Tennyson, the Poet Laureate, whom he revered, wrote and dedicated to Lear a beautiful poem, 'On his Travels in Greece'. Through him, Lewis Carroll, a mutual friend, may well have been influenced in his own fantastical works. Thomas Hanbury, the great philanthropist and creator of perhaps the finest garden in Europe, bought many of his paintings and helped him buy land close by his own. They eventually fell out over the building of a large hotel in front of Lear's house at San Remo, which he called the Villa Tennyson after his great friend.

Edward Lear was someone we would all have liked to know and been cheered up by. For all the tragedy in his life, he was one of the most talented and entertaining men England has ever nurtured.

Robin Hanbury-Tenison

INTRODUCTION



THIS BOOK arises not so much from childhood experience as from lifelong pleasure in the work of Edward Lear, and more immediately from an attempt to put together a lecture on Lear as a poet, a role in which I thought he was utterly under-estimated. The lecture was given at Oxford, and printed in 1991 by Yale University Press in *The Art of Poetry*, but it was unsatisfactory, because there was a great deal I did not know or had not considered, both about the paintings and about the context in life of the poems. I did not remember that Blake in his 'Milton' in 1808 had defined the extent of London, 'in immense labours and sorrows, ever building, ever falling', as stretching from Blackheath to Hounslow and Finchley to Norwood, though he puts Hampstead and Highgate outside it. What is worse, I had not grasped the importance of the thirty and more thick volumes of Edward Lear's diaries at Harvard, or of what is revealed in his vast and still largely unpublished correspondence. I had not understood how his poetry, varying in tone from the merest jokes to the most serious, was scattered. Some of it, a poem for Thomas Hanbury for example, is still being traced. Indeed, there is still no complete, reliable edition of it, so that any reader of the list of thirty-seven Nonsense publications of Lear's work in the Royal Academy Lear Exhibition Catalogue of 1985¹ will be amazed, and book collectors will despair. Those who consult the list of his various scientific engravings of birds and animals will be even more appalled at how scattered they are.

A great deal has been done, particularly on the occasion of that exhibition. I have relied on the unfailing generosity, the lifelong experience and the vast knowledge of Edward Lear of his biographer, who is the editor of his *Selected Letters* (1988), and the writer of by far the best

book about his paintings (1991), Vivien Noakes. My debts to other people, such as the Gillies family, are really debts to and through her. They ramify to such an extent through every page of this book that it is likely I have not always acknowledged them in detail, though I am most deeply grateful for her help. I could not have done without the photocopies of Lear's letters which she has collected. To Kevin Van Anglen, to Eliot House, Harvard, to its Master and to the Houghton Library there, which owns thousands of Lear's paintings, boxes and volumes of his manuscripts, and the whole of what survives of his diary, I owe a debt almost as vast and as unrepayable. Thirdly, I was enormously helped and my work much speeded by photocopies made available to me by Dr Lee of the rare books collection of the University of Bristol, and by the Tennyson Research Centre at Lincoln, which has Lear's letters to the Tennyson family. It will be seen that reading all this material was in itself a formidable task, but one document illuminates another and in the end, because of his long diaries and his endless letter-writing, Edward Lear is a rewarding subject of historical study.

He was that from the beginning, of course. He was a rare or unique combination of charm and brilliance and hard intelligence, and a volcano of creativity; he was gregarious and clubbable and socially merry, but with a deep enough tinge of private melancholy to make him interesting. Some of the secrets of his friendships remain obscure: I do not really understand the gloom of the Lushington family for instance, and I wish I knew Fortescue better. I am not really sure why Gussie Bethell refused to marry him, but neither perhaps was he. She was the great-aunt of a close friend of mine, which fact gave me a sense of closeness to Edward Lear before I had ever read about his life. One gets that sense more strongly from the immediacy of his water-colours. It was those, I think, that first drew one's interest to him: both the way he painted and the thrilling places he had been. The easy days of the 1930s, when the Northbrook and Lushington collections of Lear came on the market at once, and you could buy a water-colour in Museum Street for 5s., were alas long over; the huge Harvard Lear archive had begun to be formed at that time by Philip Hofer and W. Osgood Field, his assistant and friend, and it has at least done Lear the enormous service of sheltering his water-colours from sunlight. But even in the 1950s it was still easy to buy an Edward Lear for £5 or £10.

It is mostly Lear's letters to private friends that reveal him as possibly the greatest caricaturist of his adult lifetime. This skill of his had been barely discernible in the illustrations of his Nonsense books, which are

very much more wooden and less appealing than the pen and ink originals; those are often drawings of an exquisite subtlety. He became more widely known following the publication of his correspondence with Chichester Fortescue by Lady Strachey in a lavish edition in 1907, and a second volume in 1911. While she was doing this work her eyes were failing, and she was no longer young; furthermore, she seems to have imposed a kind of prudent censorship on some of the letters, although the originals are now luckily out of harm's way in the Taunton public records. They are there because Lady Strachey, formerly Constance Braham, a niece of Fortescue's wife Lady Waldegrave, had married a country neighbour at Sutton Court near Chew Magna in Somerset. Many of the families Lear knew, and for whom he drew his caricatures or self-portraits, married into one another, so that Lady Strachey was a cousin of the Beadons, the Bruces (Lord Aberdare), the Norths and Symonds, Sligger Urquhart of Balliol, Lytton Strachey, the Pattles, the Prinseps, the Lushingtons and the Tennysons. Anyone familiar with the lives of grand Victorians will recognize this as a usual phenomenon: I record this one case as typical of many.

In the midst of this entanglement prowls Lear, as lonely and as tigerish as his cat – or as his numerous cats, because in the twenty years between a stray kitten called the Frogлдыte, which he picked up with John Proby in Sicily, and the twin brother and sister Lear and his servant called Fee and Foss, from *adelphi* and *adelphos*, there were a number of others. Lear's zoological drawing has a vast range: it seems that nothing was beyond him, and the care he took over the tiniest detail, on every hair of the hyrax, is still astounding. He might also have well become the most distinguished English painter of birds, had he persevered: if there had been money in it, that is to say, because he lived too late to have a rich and generous patron and too early to enjoy an organized commercial success. John Gould, who ruthlessly exploited Lear, and did carve himself out a success, was an extremely tough nut. It is not simply on the basis of Lear's spectacular parrots that I place him so high, but for those birds where just a pinch of caricature enters into his drawing: most of all the half-dozen or so owls in Gould's *Birds of Europe*, the Great Snowy Owl for example.

We all used to think of Lear as one of those extraordinary Victorians, like G. M. Hopkins, who contrive to be interesting in many different ways, and yet their whole is somehow greater than the sum of their parts. The whole of what Lear was, as of what Ruskin was or what Byron was, comes slowly to light in the course of reading their full life-stories and

their letters as well as their more formal writings. In some ways Edward Lear has been very well served. Several of his friends wrote small memoirs of him, and in the next generation Angus Davidson, who was a minor member of Bloomsbury and the translator of Alberto Moravia, wrote a gentle life of Lear in 1933, which in its day was a revelation. It certainly was so to me as late as 1958, when I first came across it. Still, it was not a very deep book, and it did not by any means exhaust the available sources; all forty volumes of the diaries could have been bought for £5 in about 1930. With the first biography of Lear by Vivien Noakes in 1968, we are on much more solid ground. Indeed, with the latest edition of that book (1985), the Royal Academy Catalogue (1985), the *Selected Letters* (1988), and *The Painter Edward Lear* (1991), she has put down solid foundations for all future Lear scholarship. I have seldom or never discovered that she missed anything.

My first intention was to explore Lear's poetry, and I suppose that I thought a note on his travels would do no harm, since I had explored and loved many of the same places. I swiftly discovered (but a little too late) the magnitude of this task, and I have tried to do justice to every aspect of it, though it has sometimes been summary justice. The fascinating thing about the poems is that they developed so late in Lear's life, out of children's entertainments which clearly already contained autobiography in a kind of transformation scene. One is not certain whether he is laughing or weeping. The remote inspiration of this highly individual form of art is stranger still: it seems to have roots in the traditional mummers' plays, which were seldom written down and almost never seriously recorded until too late, about the 1900s; yet they go back to Shakespeare's day, and proliferate in the children's nursery rhymes collected by the Opies.² Lear's idea of Nonsense itself seems to derive from these rhymes. It can be found in Kele's *Christmas Carolles* (1550), or more conveniently in Herbert Read's 1939 anthology, *Knapsack*.³

Tirlery lorpin, the laverock sang,
So merrily pipes the sparrow,
The cow broke loose, the rope ran home,
Sir, God give you goodmorrow.

Things are out of hand in the kitchen, the crow goes to the water, the goose goes to the green, it is a kingdom of topsy-turvydom or escape beloved to children. 'Tirlery lorpin' is like 'Tirra lirra', the song of the lark, but the sparrow has a role closer to home. In his last poem, that is, in the one he intended to be his final statement, which he sent to

fourteen or more friends at the end of his life, Lear pruned his material unmercifully, and the laconic result is indeed the most brilliant of self-caricatures, hiding and revealing its meaning by the same words: and it is beautiful as well as musical. It is in its way the essence of Alfred Tennyson's poetry. It is almost as if some urchin had picked the gold watch from the nineteenth century's waistcoat pocket and run off with it, while it played its intimate mechanical tune. The art form of Uncle Arly goes a long way beyond parody.

But Lear was professionally and, I think, essentially a painter. There is a passage at the end of Chesterton's *Man Who Was Thursday* that reminded me recently of his paintings: Chesterton, Maurice Baring, a nephew or cousin of Lear's friend Lord Northbrook, and Aldous Huxley all wrote interesting essays about Lear, but this is about dawn. 'Dawn was breaking over everything in colours at once clear and timid: as if Nature made a first attempt at yellow and a first attempt at rose. A breeze blew so clean and sweet, that one could not think it blew from the sky; it blew rather through some hole in the sky.' Give or take a little and this seems true of the crisp, airy quality of Lear's Cretan sketches, and the light cavalry dash of his sympathy with mountains to the very end of his life. It is as if some instrument, first confidently though very youthfully sounded in the Lake District 1830s, and coming to perfection in the 1860s and 1870s in spite of Lear's breakdown over his house, and over his Indian journey, could still be heard with that harshly mellow quality we associate with the old age of artists; and yet the instrument remains the same. The power of the black, final version of his Tennysonian paintings is very great, as is the richness of his unfinished *Enoch Arden*. Whichever way you look at Lear, and there are indeed many, he was an interesting and, within his limits, a great artist.

It is sometimes difficult to trace him. The *Journey to Petra* was published by Lushington in *Macmillan's Magazine*, April 1897, though it has luckily been reprinted in H. Van Thal's valuable selection from Lear's travel writings (1952). Granville Proby printed Lear's cartoon version of their Sicilian journey as *Lear in Sicily* (1938). Ray Murphy produced an abridged version of the *Indian Journal* in 1953, Rowena Fowler a very beautiful *Cretan Journal* (1984) and Denise Harvey and Philip Sherrard an equally beautiful *Lear in Corfu* (1988): these last two are the only thorough, well-produced and fully illustrated editions of any travel writings of Lear to appear, either in his lifetime or since. His earliest travel writings are hard to find. He used his diaries like his sketches, of which he left at least 10,000 to friends who had supported

him with money. He kept them as a quarry, to be written up or painted up on winter evenings. He projected an *Egypt*, for example, which has never appeared, although he did write up his diaries.

He was never satisfied with the financial arrangements for his travel books, which were laborious to produce, and more so to distribute to the subscribers. He hesitated over the means of illustration, drawings on stone or on wood and, at the end of his life, various forms of photographic printing. Only the Tennyson produced after his death is in its way satisfactory: but Hallam Tennyson was not pleased even with that. The Bodleian Library has a fine copy (unsigned). The poems – ‘To E. L.’, ‘On his Travels in Greece’, ‘The Palace of Art’ and ‘The Daisy’ – were privately printed in 100 copies signed by the poet, by Boussod, Valadon, 1889. Beautiful as this posthumous book is, Hallam is to be found cajoling and badgering the publishers in a way that Lear was never in a position to do. ‘I return the Lear reproductions. Can you possibly insert two small Goupilgravures of the divine Peneian Pass and of the Palms and Temples of the South. His Lordship would *much* like this.’ There are six of these letters, including ‘Why have Lord Tennyson’s copies of the Lear book not been forwarded?’ and ‘Jan. 19, 1890. Send *me* at once to Osborne, Isle of Wight, where I shall be on Tuesday, a copy of Lear’s Illustrated Book for Her Majesty.’ On 30 January, ‘The books arrived last night. My father likes them.’ It is an august ending to a protracted agony; the letters are at Harvard.

It is possible to discover in libraries copies of the *Journal of a Landscape Painter in Albania* (1851), in *Southern Calabria* (1852), and in *Corsica* in 1868 (1870), and they were all three shortened and reprinted in the 1960s though not even the reprints are now easy to find in antiquarian bookshops, and of the old editions both *Corsica* and *Albania* would now cost four or five hundred pounds. But Lear’s earliest travel books are more difficult still. *Views in Rome and its Environs* (1841) is a privately printed folio, as the *Parrots* had been, and an extremely rare book that very few libraries possess, although Harvard has acquired a copy in the last sixty years. That is not coloured, but some copies exist where the lithographs were coloured by hand, that is, where they are aquatints, like the *Parrots*. *Illustrated Excursions in Italy*, two volumes in quarto (1846), is a little easier to find; for example the Bodleian Library has both volumes. They were apparently issued in April and as ‘Second Series’ in August, but Volume 2 seems to be rarer, at least in public libraries. The *Views in Rome* and the *Excursions in Italy* offer little in the way of text. Even *Southern Calabria*, with its second part ‘The Kingdom of Naples’, makes

a pleasantly youthful impression. *Albania*, where Lear is alone with his servant, and conscious perhaps of Colonel Leake as a great example, is more solemn and more professional.

The finest of Edward Lear's productions as a traveller is probably *Views in the Seven Ionian Islands*, because its chromolithographs are of such beauty and done with such care. There is a brief text, and we have the diary that covers this period (1863). Lear had planned the book for some time and it marks a high point in his career as an artist. No one was producing anything like it at the time, no one had done so in the past and certainly no one has done so since. It may be remembered that 1864 saw the British withdrawal not only from Corfu but from the entire province of the Ionian Islands, which were handed over to Greece, so that to this most unlikely of British dependencies Lear's book is a funeral monument. It marks an end of things in another way too, because when Lear first went out to Rome in the 1830s, and even when he settled in Corfu in the 1850s, it was still normal to buy a souvenir image of the place from a painter, but by 1865 it was perhaps more usual to buy photographs, and by 1885 picture postcards. Lear was most interested in photography, and kept an accurate eye on its usefulness to him as a painter. At the end of his life he was interested to find some of the same people he had known as technical staff in C. J. Hullmandel's lithographic studio when he was printing parrots from his own drawings on stone, not long after the death of Blake, at work for a photographic company called Autotype. The *Ionian Islands* prints are often found separately, but when they are bound the text is of course with them. They were reproduced in facsimile in 1000 copies in 1979 by Broadbent of Oldham, but I have never seen an example of that edition.

The reader of this book will draw many sad observations about the lives of artists in the nineteenth century. It was Lear's fate to fall in with the Pre-Raphaelites at a time when he was vulnerably open to bad advice. They were wonderfully decorative artists, of whom William Morris, whom Lear never knew, was the most serious, but Lear fell under the influence of Holman Hunt, an assured but quite irresponsible young man with his way to make, and much time and energy were wasted. The very idea of being exclusively a topographic artist, that is, a painter of places without much in the way of people, was hard for the public to swallow. Lear was not confident with faces, as Peter de Wint was not. Of course, his landscape painting goes back to an eighteenth-century and earlier tradition: to Poussin and to Claude. That is where Lear found and learnt it. But paintings of pure landscape did not make large

sums of money. A gentleman might pay for a picture of the deer in his own park, as Lord Egremont paid Turner. A scene with a ruin might equally do well. But the obsession of Cézanne, who was nearly thirty years younger than Lear, with Mont Ste-Victoire, which means so much to us, would have appealed very weakly to the Victorians. Queen Victoria was taught drawing by Lear, yet we know that the Queen thought Turner was mad; what she really relished was Murillo.

If Lear had done nothing but his birds or his zoos, or nothing but his travel books illustrated with landscapes, or even if he had written only his letters and diaries, or nothing but his poetry, we would still surely respect and admire him today. At the time when I lectured on Lear in 1988 I had long since given up the idea of writing about him at greater length, since it was obviously desirable that Vivien Noakes, who already knew so much about Edward Lear after working on him for more than twenty years, should produce a full book, such as her then publisher refused to contemplate. My ambition was revived by her Academy catalogue and by the Lear exhibition. Ruth Pitman's *Edward Lear's Tennyson* (1988) and Philip Hofer's *Lear as a Landscape Draughtsman* (1967) sharpened my curiosity.

In writing Tennyson's biography I had put aside his relationship with Lear, as I felt it to be more part of Lear's life than the poet's, and the poet hardly seemed conscious of the intensity of Lear's feelings. I did not then know what was in Lear's diaries about the Tennysons. It will be a pleasure now to put that right. I have scarcely dealt with Lear's musical settings of Tennyson or of other poets. I have heard a few, but they are not very strong, they are the thin distillation of an essence of lyrics that we prefer as they are. Lear was not as great a composer as he was a painter, not as original in his music as he was in poetry. It is curious that the closest analogy to his parodies, his sadness and his humour is to be found in the work of John Betjeman, which has an equally musical component: they were both almost essentially performers. But nothing I have suggested can quite explain a single one of Edward Lear's innumerable gifts.

I am most grateful to the Houghton Library at Harvard and its staff; the Earl of Derby and his librarian; the London Library and its staff; the Gloucester and Quedgely public libraries; Dr Gordon, the Librarian of Newcastle University; Sue Gates of Lincoln; the Scottish National Library; the Liverpool Public Library; the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; the Librarian of the Linnaean Society; the Bodleian Library, Oxford and its staff; Mr and Mrs Devitt; Matthew Connolly; Mr Harvey-Bathurst of

Eastnor Castle; the Headmaster of Rendcombe College; Christie's of Scotland; Agnew's; David Carritt Ltd; the Leger Gallery; Mrs Patrick Kavanagh; Mrs Lees-Milne; Mrs Mary Burn; Mrs Ross; the late Anne Jeffery; Mr Simon Hanbury of La Mortola; Mr Anthony Hobson of Whitsbury; Chris Hare of Southern Heritage, as well as to those I have thanked already. We all equally owe thanks to the late Philip Hofer and Mr Field of Harvard, through whom the mass of Lear's life's work has been preserved and can be studied. While I was awaiting proofs, a few new fragments came to light which should be recorded. A life of Parson Hawker of Morwenstow, a friend of the Bishop of Exeter of the day and so no friend to Canterbury, reveals that the Archbishop Lear loved had so few teeth that even his calls to prayer could not be understood. I have seen for sale in a Devitts catalogue an illustrated alphabet like Lear's with rhymes and cartoons in which the hero has a distinct resemblance to a thinner, wiry-whiskered Foss. The booklet is called *The Fan*. It should finally be noted that the method Lear was seeking in his last years for the reproduction of his paintings was in fact discovered and used by the son of Samuel Palmer (died 1881) in his edition of his father's drawings for Milton's *Minor Poems*, for which he certainly used both the techniques of photography and of etching, in a mysterious combination.

Peter Levi
Frampton on Severn

CHAPTER ONE

BOYHOOD



EDWARD LEAR was born a Londoner, his parents' twentieth child, on 12 May 1812, four months after Dickens, and 103 years after Dr Johnson. In 1812, George III was still king, you could shoot snipe in Conduit Street, and a flock of sheep might slow you down in Piccadilly. London must have looked much as Canaletto had painted it: all the same, it was just beginning to burst the boundaries of what we now call a country town. Soane's Bank of England was being built, but Hampstead and Chelsea were distant villages across the fields. Those who were born citizens of that astounding city were doomed to live out their time in a constant and catastrophic decline of the quality of life. By the mid-century coal had blackened every building, and the smell of the Thames and the smog were at their worst. Edward Lear was forced to spend most of his winters abroad because of his weak lungs.

Early in the century, the suburbs had become a prudent refuge, though each in turn was swallowed up as London spread beyond them. Edward Lear's home was in the village of Holloway, at the corner of Holloway Road and the Seven Sisters Road, just on the flank of Highgate Hill. The house was called Bowman's Lodge because it was said to stand on the site of an old archery field, where Bowman's Mews is now. In the 1843 *History of Islington* it belonged to Charles Mann. The house appears, from a print used to advertise the girls' school that it became, to have been built and stuccoed in the late eighteenth century. It was a capacious, unpretentious villa of two storeys protected from the road by iron railings, with two or three trees to give it some privacy. Other buildings crowded it from the sides. After it had been adapted to serve as a girls' school, it was pulled down in Edward Lear's lifetime. The print to

advertise the school shows only five bays, but Lear drew it in his diary with seven, and he also remembered an attic which the print has tidied out of existence. There were finer houses not far away, and gardens designed or improved by Repton; Bowman's Lodge was just a suburban dwelling-house for a minor professional man, not unlike some in the area that still survive as doctors' surgeries or solicitors' offices.

The Lears had chosen it because it was convenient for the City. Mr Lear was marked both by his successes and his failures in life, as part of that swiftly increasing middle class which was socially mobile in both directions. If one compares Edward's early life with the early chapters of the comic novel *A Rogue's Life*, by his friend Wilkie Collins (1879), one must concede that he might have gone either way. Still, to imagine Holloway as it was, one must think away the grizzly, crowded accommodation of the last 170 years, above all the railways with the spread of differences they have made. All the same, the Holloway Road and the Seven Sisters Road were already busy and important highways. The Great North Road through Holloway was a drovers' track as well as a highway: Romney had lived and worked in a public house not far from Bowman's.

Edward's first excursions were away from London, towards Highgate and in Hornsey Fields. Later in life his memory flooded with sadness at the sight of any beautiful landscape. He wrote in his diary for 1 June 1870:

What a mingling of sadness and admiration of landscape botheringly will persist in existing. All the unsought morbid feelings – (certainly unsought for I knew not what even the meaning of morbid was in those days) – of past years crop up at once – such as the Hornsey Fields and Highgate archway, and the sad large thorn tree at Holloway about 1819 or 1820.

Hornsey Fields lay to the north, and Highgate Arch was an Elizabethan tollgate; now the fields are gone and nothing remains of the arch except the name Archway, where the A1 heads away towards Scotland. Once, it must have marked the beginning of real country.

The house stood about a mile and a half from what is now King's Cross Station, yet houses were pretty there and not very high; it was not far away that Keats listened to his nightingale. For 200 years or more Londoners had been moving out of London, step by step. As it became busier and cast its shadow further, people like the Lears moved for cheapness as well as amenity and rural peace. Their first child was born in Pentonville, a mile or so closer to the centre. We know little about

their origins, though more than Edward knew, since he was brought up by his elder sisters and given only a cobweb of family mythology. George Lear, the son of a butcher from Gillingham in Dorset, came up to London in the seventeenth century and became an apprentice fruiterer. By 1692 he belonged to the Company of Fruiterers and was a freeman of the City. He was illiterate, but when he died in 1745 he left seven children and a sugar refinery. This was a profitable business based on West Indian sugar cane and therefore on the slave trade. One of his seven children was Edward's grandfather, Henry, who ran a refinery in Thames Street, close to London Bridge; his parish was St Benet's, Paul's Wharf. The year before his father died he married Margaret Lester; they had six children, the youngest of whom was called Jeremiah, born in 1757. He was Edward's father.

The whole family moved to Whitechapel, which was a solid suburb in those days, but there Henry died of a fever. His widow Margaret still carried on the family business, and Jeremiah was brought up as a sugar refiner. Edward knew nothing about all this; he knew more about his mother's side of the family, though even that somewhat cloudily. In 1788, Jeremiah married a Whitechapel girl called Ann Skerrett. The wedding was at Wanstead, and Edward's sisters told him it had been an elopement, but that was not exactly true, because the banns were called normally. The bride was an heiress in a small way. She and her mother both had long lives, and although Edward never knew his grandmother, who died in 1802, his sister Ann knew her quite well. She left money to Ann, either because she was the eldest surviving grandchild or because she had to look after the other children. This grandmother's memory went back to the 1745 rebellion. Her daughter married at nineteen when Jeremiah was thirty-one: they settled in Pentonville and their first child, Ann, was born there in 1790. She was twenty-two years older than Edward, and they were deeply dependent on one another; she never married and was like a mother to him.

Jeremiah prospered at first in his career. In 1790 he joined the Fruiterers, and in 1799 he was Master of that Company. At that height of success he became sworn in as a stockbroker, which in those days was a dangerous game, as he was to discover. When the new Stock Exchange was built he became a share-holder in it. He was not alone, of course, he had uncles and brothers of whom we know almost nothing, who supported him and apparently cushioned the blow when it came. We know more about his wife's family, because their memories were tenacious of grandeurs long ago. Edward's sister Sarah Street, who had

married a bank manager and settled after his death in New Zealand, was the grandmother of Sir Harold Gillies (1882–1960), and it is through his family that we have a typescript of Edward's letters to Ann, and an assortment of other information. Edward's mother bore twenty-one children, though only three of his sisters married, and of those three only Sarah had children of her own.

Ann Skerrett's case is astonishing, but not unique. Indeed, in some ways it is similar to my own grandmother's, who also bore twenty-one children. As a result my father, who was one of the youngest, was largely brought up by unmarried elder sisters, his mother was often unwell, and although there was money while my grandfather was alive, my father did not inherit much, and his youth was adventurous. It is not uncommon in such families that by some mysterious compensation of nature a number of the children or grandchildren should be childless, and that is what happened in Edward's family. Two children were still-born or died at once, and two Henrys, two Sarahs and a Catherine died very young, so Edward cannot have known more than thirteen or so of his brothers and sisters, even as a tiny child, and we shall see that many of them, let alone most of his cousins, remained mysterious to him. His mother's family claimed descent through Florence Skerritt, Florence Usher and Eleanor Mason from the Brignalls of Durham. It is curious that this family tree is entirely matriarchal.

The important focus of the story is sister Ann. Edward destroyed twenty years or more of his own early diaries, but his letters to Ann were very full, like the chapters of an exuberant journal only slightly self-censored for publication, and the manuscript, which disappeared only in the 1930s when the typescript was made, may one day re-emerge. It was from Ann or Eleanor that he learned to draw, in that perfect and lucid style of flower-painting so common in the days of the *Botanical Magazine*, and apparently so unattainable in ours. He was taught the art by his sisters in what they called the painting room. They in turn had learnt it by copying, aided no doubt by one of the numerous text-books of the 1800s. Edward's earliest models of animal drawing were the illustrations to Buffon. It is not certain what edition he had, and these illustrations varied, but probably it was not luxurious. The whole work in French in its numerous volumes covered all natural history, including that of man, distinguished from other animals by the size of his calves and his habit of kissing, but by 1812 it had been edited in one volume for children with *jolies gravures en bois* (1809), and translated. Tennyson as a boy

educated himself out of his father's copy, though that is not among the books in the Tennyson Library at Lincoln. The woodcuts in my 1809 copy are appealing, and it may be those he first painted, but the 1809 book is tiny, and his father might well have owned something more substantial.

The drawings Edward made as a boy, those in the album now in the National Library at Edinburgh, for example, are perfectly conventional, of parakeets and pretty little birds and butterflies, and of brilliant flowers. He grew up with a girl's accomplishments, as those were in 1812: natural history drawing of birds, flowers, and a few shells, slight, comic verses and parodies of poets like Collins, and singing and some original composition of song, though he was unable to write his songs down. At that stage he might have been a vicar's daughter. He was affectionate, he was devoted to children, and he cultivated intimate friendship wherever it was offered. Maybe he felt an unassuaged passion for the nursery with its happy games, but a nursery he had not known for long. In a way he was like the lady buried at Crewe who 'painted in watercolour, played upon the harp, and was an intimate friend of the Duchess of Bridgewater'. He grew up without knowing how to ride a horse or shoot a gun, or how to fish, and without classical languages until late in life. He was quite uneducated in any normal sense.

All the same he was happy. His worst suffering was what is often called temporal lobe epilepsy, which from early boyhood attacked him up to ten or fifteen times a month, sometimes several times a day. From about the age of six to eleven, when he went to school for a short time, Edward brooded over his epilepsy, suffered it continually, and feared it 'every morning in the little study when learning my lessons, all day long, and always in the evenings and at night. The strong will of sister Harriet put a short pause to the misery, but very short' (*Diary*, 15 August 1866). Although he became convinced that his disease could not really ever be controlled, and so had no need to blame himself for its persistence, Edward knew what was wrong because his sister Jane had the same disease. It is probable that he thought as most people did at the time that the spasms had some gruesome connection with sex, and maybe with madness, but whatever shame he felt about them seems to have vanished in middle age, after he had consulted doctors. Harriet taught him how to control the spasms, and he did so to such a degree that few or none of his friends guessed the secret until he was dead and it was found in his diaries. He seems to have taken up his active, outdoor landscape painter's

life as a kind of therapy, and his achievement of a lifework on the scale and of the quality he did achieve was a victory beyond all expectation and praise.

We can enter into his early feelings only through his later memories.

The earliest of all the morbidnesses I can recollect must have been somewhere about 1819 – when my father took me to a field near Highgate, where was a rural performance of gymnastic clowns etc – and a band. The music was good – at least it attracted me – and the sunset and twilight I remember as if yesterday. And I can recollect crying half the night after all the small gaiety broke up – and also suffering for days at the memory of the past scene. [*Diary*, 24 March 1877]

At some time in his childhood, Lear must have seen mummers' plays, with their comic, melancholy characters who are like village naturals or Shakespearean rustics. The plays are mostly lost now, but they were popular and traditional entertainments, made all the more poignant and mysterious by being handed down through centuries by the illiterate, with much resulting incomprehension. They lie behind much of Lear's lyric poetry and his style of humour, as we shall see. The feeling he came to call morbid appears to range from a childish wailing at loss to the Watteauesque melancholy of a sunset. It is the sadness of his limericks as well as their funniness that appeals so strongly to adults. The sadness he felt after his evening at Highgate and which he remembered for so long does not need explaining to anyone who remembers their own childhood. It has nothing to do with the pre-epileptic condition of trance that critics have attributed to Tennyson.

Edward was a nervous, short-sighted little boy. Once Ann took him to Margate: seaside resorts were booming in these years, and in 1848 he still remembered Mr Cox's hawk, 'and the colliers disembarking coal at the pier – and the windmills – and the chimneysweep you so *cruelly* MADE me walk round and round to see he was not smoking – shocking. My imperfect sight in those days – ante-spectacled – formed everything into a horror.'

In 1816, when Edward was four, Jeremiah seems to have gone bankrupt for a four-year period. The event is as mysterious as any in Edward's childhood, but in 1816 his father defaulted on the Exchange, owing £2150 11s. 1d. A friend called Smith enabled him to settle these debts at half a crown in the pound with £269 5s. 5d., but meanwhile tradesmen's bills came in that he was not able to meet. Jeremiah appears to have gone to a debtors' prison, perhaps King's Bench, and is said to

have stayed there until 1820. Most of the daughters were pushed out to work as governesses, and it is not clear how many of them survived. The house at Holloway was let to Jews: Edward grew up believing that they 'always opened the windows in thunder-storms – for the easier entrance of the Messiah, but to greater spoiling of the furniture'. But at some point Jeremiah borrowed £1000 from his banker which he repaid, and it is not clear how long he really spent in prison. His attendances at the Fruiterers' Company were apparently uninterrupted. Vivien Noakes is sure he was never in the King's Bench.¹ The Islington Rate Book gives his name down to 1819–20, then Jh Lear and Josiah Lear until 1825 when Josiah is crossed out and Jeremiah reappears. This might be a kinsman, or it might be a clerical error. Jeremiah is not in the records of debtors' prisons at all, so far as they survive, and certainly not in the official bankruptcy lists in the *London Gazette*. The Gillies papers date his bankruptcy July–September 1818 and October–December 1819, and refer to the *Times* Index, F26a 2a and F402b. He is recorded only as a defaulter on the Stock Exchange but continues as a member.

Who knows what happened? What was Jeremiah doing in his room at the top of the house, which he kept locked? He worked there on Sundays, sometimes from four in the morning, and no women were ever allowed in. What is queerer still, there was no recorded visible product of his work. Working on Sunday combined with the registration of his children's baptisms in the Nonconformist register at Dr Williams' Library suggests he was not a conventional Christian, and the 'forge' he used suggests some kind of experiment. Dr Johnson once spent three days experimenting in secret at the Chelsea Pottery, though his idea turned out fruitless. Was Jeremiah, too, a scientific experimenter? Was it sugar-refining he thought he could improve? It appears to me probable that he was like Johnson's Sober, in the *Idler* essay (31, 18 November 1758), whose 'daily amusement was Chemistry. He has a small furnace, which he employs in distillation and which has long been the solace of his life. He draws oils and waters, and essences and spirits which he knows to be of no use; sits and counts the drops as they come from his retort, and forgets that while a drop is falling, a moment flies away.' It is possible to be such a man, to nourish such an obsession, and still to dress for dinner.

The circumstances were clearly dire, as his banker, whom Edward knew later in Roehampton, confirmed, but Jeremiah behaved honestly and appears to have avoided extreme penalties. When he was in prison the children believed his wife took him or sent him a six-course dinner

every day 'with the delicacies of the season'. Edward felt his elder brothers had left his mother in the lurch at this stage, but the truth was that they were swiftly offloaded to the United States as forgers and deserters. Mrs Lear and the remains of her household went to New Street, which I well remember as a ravine of grimy brownish-yellow brick, draped in Dickensian shadows, near my father's warehouse in Houndsditch before the Blitz. Among a number of curious trades, I think it nurtured a button-hole maker. For a very long time that had been a Jewish area, and the Bevis Marks Synagogue was close by, but there is no evidence of a Jewish connection of blood with the Lears. Anyway, Edward Lear hated the place. When the trouble was over, and the remains of the family apparently back in Bowman's Lodge, Mr and Mrs Lear went away with their daughter Florence down-river to Gravesend. That was cheap and peaceful and a place of pleasure; it was what Margate became.

Before 1840 Gravesend was a small, quiet seaport and a traditional place of refuge, beyond the jurisdiction of London magistrates and convenient for a sudden flit to the Continent. The house where old Lear lived for his last four years, Parrock Place, has gone now, but it was in the parish of Milton. It might perhaps have been the Georgian house called Parrock Hall. The piers and libraries and pleasure-gardens were all in the future, and so was the railway. All the same, Jeremiah Lear was regular in attendance at the Company of Fruiterers until his dying day.²

It is possible that Gravesend was only the refuge of a sick old man, a retirement cottage. By the time Edward was fifteen his father was seventy; after 1827, when he may be said to have retired, Edward does not seem to have worried about him. Jeremiah died of a heart attack in 1833 at the age of seventy-six, and was buried on 5 September. Ann Lear lived on in south coast resorts until she died at Dover in 1844. Edward's letters to his mother show some concern for her, and anxiety that she should have enough money, but he never seems to have wanted to see her again. In 1837 when Edward was twenty-five, his sister Florence died at the age of thirty-one, and at roughly the same time two other sisters, the governesses Cordelia and little Catherine, also died. The grim and tough-minded Harriet went to Scotland, where she died unmarried; of Mary we know that she married a Mr Boswell in Sussex, went to New Zealand with him and died childless, but Edward was always conscious of them and kept in contact of a kind through Ann and Eleanor. The only members of his family he continued to see regularly

after the age of fifteen were his sisters Ann, who was then thirty-six, who had refused at least one proposal of marriage and been in love with a major, Sarah Street, who was thirty-three, and Eleanor Newsom who was twenty-eight. Yet the Lears were tenacious of their family identity. In New Zealand in 1935 Robert Michell still treasured a panel of the wedding dress of Eleanor Mason, which must have dated from around 1700. Mary Boswell, to whom Edward used to send money when he could, kept a silhouette of him made when he was a boy, probably at Margate. It passed through her family to the National Portrait Gallery in 1915. All the perplexities of this account, and they are more numerous than I have underlined, and some of Edward's vagueness about his family and early years, are only typical of the myths and confusions that arise in enormous families.

One stray brother called Charles, born in 1808 and only four years older than Edward, does deserve notice, since he found his way to West Africa, where he became a kind of medical missionary. It is best to tell his story in the words of Sophie Street, who was married to Charles, son of Sarah Street; they were written down, with much other family lore, by Mrs Bowen, Sophie's grand-daughter, in 1907.

[Charles Lear] was a great favourite of the Chiefs, and when he nearly died of malaria, was put on board a ship for England. The Captain would not take him without a nurse, so Adjouah the native girl who nursed him went too. Charles insisted on marrying her first. He took her to his sister Eleanor Newsome who had no children, and lived with her husband at Leatherhead, Surrey. The story goes that the first day after her arrival she poured the jug of water in her bedroom over her head. They became very fond of Adjouah, and sent her to school for three years, and Charles returned to the Mission field, where he died. Afterwards she became a Missionary and returned to work amongst her own people.

Interpretation of this unlikely tale is of course open to anyone, but Charles Lear certainly vanished again into Africa, probably in the 1840s.

The break-up of the Lear family was traumatic to the youngest, yet the handful of pictures we have of them all give a comforting, ordinary impression. Except for Mary and Harriet they were tall, and Jeremiah was on the handsome side. Ann probably painted in miniature on ivory; the painting she sent to Edward in 1847 by a Mrs Arundale is full of character and beautiful: Edward thought it perfect in every detail.

We know little more of his childhood. He could read and write and do sums, though his spelling was wild all his life. His accent was sufficiently normal that no one ever noticed it. At the age of ten he suffered a bad experience involving a brother and a wicked cousin which he always remembered, including the exact day when it occurred, which he checked as an old man. He said it was the worst thing ever done to him, yet we have no idea what it was. At eleven, he went to school, no one knows where or for how long. From these obscure and perhaps not extraordinary beginnings, he emerged into daylight at the age of thirteen as bright as a button. From 1826 to 1831 he wrote a series of verse letters that would not have disgraced the young Keats, who has left rather similar outpourings. The first went like this, for 111 lines all in the same rhyme.

To Miss Lear on her Birthday

Dear, and very dear relation,
 Time, who flies without cessation,
 Who ne'er allows procrastination, . . .
 First then I wish thee, dear relation,
 Many a sweet reduplication
 Of this thy natal celebration:
 And mayst thou from this first lunation
 Until thy vital termination
 Be free from every derogation
 By fell disease's contamination,
 Whose catalogic calculation
 Completely thwarts enumeration, –
 Emaciation, fomentation,
 With dementation – depulmentation
 And many more in computation
 For these are but an adumbration: –
 – And may'st thou never have occasion
 For any surgic operation
 Or medical administration, –
 Sanguification, – defalcation, –
 Cauterization – amputation –
 Rhubarbaration – scarification –
 And more of various designation: – . . .

Edward had an early passion for Byron, like the rest of romantic, youthful England, and bitterly mourned his death, as did young Alfred Tennyson and John Clare. His own verse shows no trace of Byronic

influence beyond a jaunty, devil-may-care tone. Indeed, the trouble with his kind of brilliant verse is that the better it gets, the worse it gets, because improvement of technique drags it towards plodding imitation. It is characteristic that the earliest, pre-adolescent attempts are thrown off at white heat, and show deliberate virtuosity, as Keats does. They are private letters, and it is natural that they embody the wish to be amusing, and to show off. Life with Ann gave Edward as a boy happy security and a source of fun, and the life and landscape of Sussex and the friends he made there offered a thrilling liberation just when he needed it. In 1821 Mary had married Mr Boswell, in 1822 Sarah married Mr Street, a Sussex bank manager, and in 1823 Eleanor married Mr Newsom and settled at Leatherhead. There is not a lot to be said for Mr Boswell, as we shall see, but the other two were good matches, and Sarah had settled at Arundel, so that by the time he was eleven, some three years before the surviving verse letters began, Edward began to visit Sussex.

It is curious how Lear's early experience of life coincided with that of Charles Dickens, who was born a few months earlier in the same year, and whose father went to the antique Marshalsea prison for a debt of £40 to a baker when Charles was twelve. For Dickens, who was shocked and humiliated by early encounters with the working class on equal terms, every detail was engraved on his memory, but for Lear, the whole of his miserable boyhood was obliterated. Yet they knew just the same London. They might easily have met as boys running around in the Marshalsea; statistics do not make it unlikely; there were some 30-40,000 cases of arrest for debt in 1837 alone. Peter Ackroyd³ casts a terrible light on the affair. In fact the paths of Dickens and the Lears did cross soon afterwards. Angus Davidson in his life of Lear⁴ tells a story he must have got from Sarah Street's descendants that Jeremiah Lear, wandering through London in his palmy days, came across his own name on a brass plate, went in and got to know his namesake: the second Jeremiah lived at Batworth Park, Lyminster, and it was in that house that Sarah met her future husband Charles Street. This second Jeremiah's youngest son George came to work in London in 1825 and in 1827 was articled as a clerk to lawyers called Ellis and Blackmore in Raymond Buildings, Holborn Court. Lear's close friend Husey Hunt worked there too. Also in 1827, Charles Dickens joined the small firm as a clerk, at 10s. 6d. a week rising to 15s. 'Having been in London two years,' George wrote later, 'I thought I knew something of town, but after a little talk with Dickens I found I knew nothing. He knew it all from Bow to Brentford.'⁵ Dickens wrote of George Lear that he owned

horses, went home to the country in the summer, had a few grand acquaintances and was an 'aristocrat of clerks'. Lyminster really was a paradise, with an Anglo-Saxon church and a fine view of Arundel across the watermeadows of the Arun, so Dickens was right, as always, to suspect a touch of class. He and Edward Lear were both close observers of class for the rest of their lives, both haunted by a despairing sadness which has little in common with the famous 'black blood' of the Tennysons, and which they learned to intermingle with the purest gaiety.

The gaiety was infectious. As a young man Edward was fond of jokes which were verbal and original and emerged in a swift, sparkling stream rather like soda-water from a syphon. They were part of his charm from the beginning. At a period when Charles Dickens and his fellow-clerks were bombarding the hats of those who passed by Raymond's Buildings with cherry-stones, Lear was arranging a visit for tea with a friend called Harry Hind (December 1830):

... if it won't suit
 I can bring up my flute,
 To skiggle and squeak,
 Any night in the week.
 – Dash, now I go to my dinner,
 For all day I've been a-
 way at the West End,
 Painting the best end
 Of some vast Parrots
 As red as new carrots, –
 (They are at the museum, –
 When you come you shall see 'em, –)
 I do the head and neck first;
 – And ever since breakfast,
 I've had one bun merely!
 So – yours quite sincerely.

He could write as easily, indeed all too easily, in the manner of Thomas Hood or Lord Byron. His 'Bard's Farwell'⁶ begins: 'Farewell mother, tears are streaming Down the tender pallid cheek ... roses dreaming ... gleaming ... speak.' It continues with rhymes like 'grieve me ... deceive me'. A landscape poem called 'Bury Hill'⁷ is just as mechanical but in its bad style very able. It holds out no promise that Lear will be a poet. It lies in its album, which might almost be a young girl's, side by side with pictures of pretty birds like kingfishers and a very

few pencil landscapes framed between two trees⁸ or seen across a fence.⁹ There are pairs of ringdoves, pairs of swallows, and carefully balanced landscape compositions. One would not really imagine that Edward Lear was going to be any good as an artist either, though the conventional style of the day, and what instruction he had received, are certainly more impressive in his pictures than in his verses.

When the light dies away in a calm summer's eve
And the sunbeams grow faint and more faint in the west,
How we love to look on till the last trace they leave
Glowes alone like a blush upon modesty's breast,
Lovely streak! dearer far than the glories of day
Seems thy beauty – and silence and shadow enshrined,
More bright as its loneliness passes away –
And leaves twilight in desolate grandeur behind! . . .

Edward is deadly serious, and the conventional language perfectly encloses his real feelings, just like a young man's evening clothes from a provincial tailor that enclose a real body. Indeed, his sunset feeling is the same here as it was at Highgate when he cried himself to sleep: 'some dream that will wake in a desolate heart Every chord into music . . . The joys which first woke it are long ago crushed.' His poem on the ruins of the temple at Aegina is in the same book: 'And the far off glorious clashing/Of thy cymbaled votary/Came through the soft air flashing/Like the sound of years gone by'. That was written in October when Edward was seventeen, and it would be fair to say the whole composition might well have won a prize at a public school or even a university, in spite of the rhyme

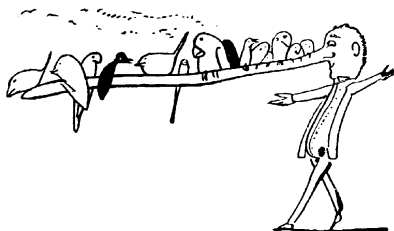
And oft in silence *o'er thee*
The dark cloud passes on
And it sheds a deeper *glory*
O'er thy wild oblivion.

The Aegina poem is illustrated. It was published in the *Poetry Review* in the 1950s, and amongst the suburban verse in which that periodical then delighted it was scarcely distinguishable. There is another in the Catalogue of the Royal Academy Lear exhibition¹⁰ which is pretty but no better, and there is a parody of the camel-driver's poem by Collins about the Lears' baggage leaving Holloway, which is clever rather than funny. Its importance is that it was clearly a parody. There was no time

of life when Lear might not parody Thomas Moore or Tennyson or any chance author (such as Lady Agnes Gray) in pictures or in verses or both; his despair deeply underlay these performances, and his gaiety riotously invaded them.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PAINTER OF BIRDS



EDWARD must always have been a swift learner, though his mind jumped like a firecracker, and the processes of his development are not always easy to follow. We know he learned drawing from Ann because an album has survived at Harvard¹ which contains their work side by side. Whatever is unsigned must be attributed by judgement, and to make matters worse, drawings were added at different times: a flower study is dated 1 May 1828, and a drawing of wheat is signed 'EL del. 9 Sep. 1834'. The lovely flower drawing which is titled *Eleanor's Geranium*, Twickenham, 18 June 1828,² is so extremely able one feels it could scarcely be by a boy of sixteen, and in its lightness, its subtlety of shade and colour, and its crispness it must surely be called more beautiful than conventional. Possibly his sister painted it: Edward could never spell her name and often wrote Ellen or Ellinor. All the same, he was learning to paint flowers, and in the style he was taught he swiftly became perfect. The notebook or album at Harvard has larkspur, columbine, wallflower, sea-shells, butterflies, some real feathers mounted, some butterflies with honesty and a note from some Linnaean text-book, 'Class 15 Tetradynamia, Order 1 Siticulosa'. The lessons in natural history and drawing evidently proceeded together. To provide one's own illustrations to Linnaeus had been a passion since the exquisite little pen drawings of Thomas Gray, but Gray was a bachelor, and there was still thought to be something old-maidish about natural history. The spirit of the enterprise is to be found in the flowers of the 1840s gathered in Richard