A brief light on a field full of shades

Francis Thompson's strange and ephemeral life gave rise to poetry which, though long out of fashion, captures the nostalgia of cricket

BY JONATHAN GAISMAN

Certain lines of poetry have the tendency to become detached from their context and resonate more generally. They find their way into the consciousness of people who might be surprised to discover the true origin of what they are quoting. So it is with the often-cited and intensely (if indistinctly) nostalgic line "O my Hornby and my Barlow long ago!" There is perhaps something of the gentleman's outfitter or more plausibly the model-train manufacturer in the initial impression made by these surnames, but the truth is that they belong far elsewhere.

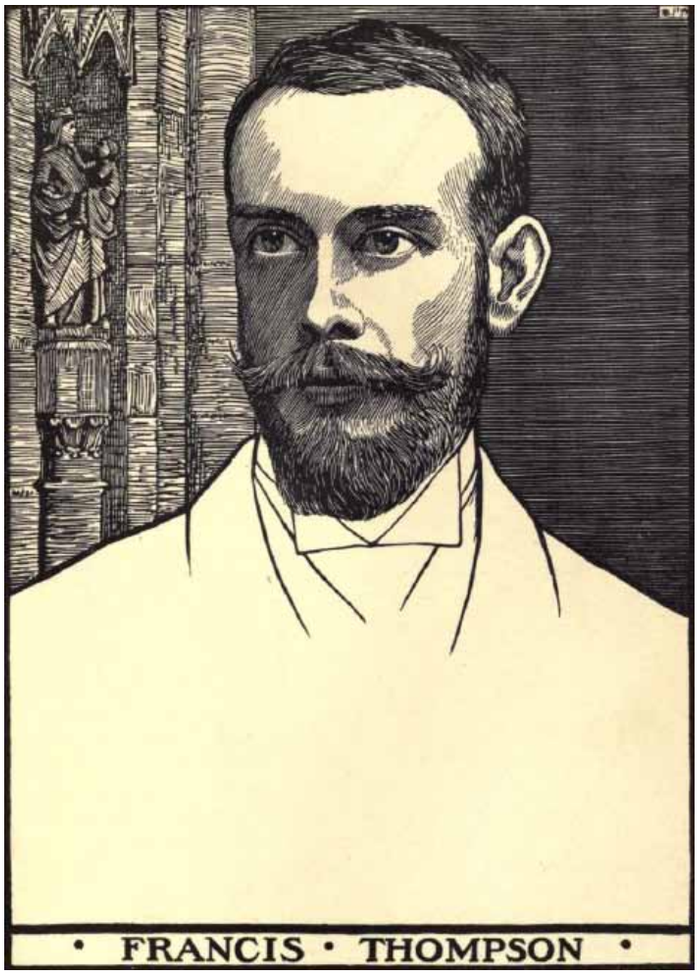
The verse from which the quotation comes makes just such an incongruous appearance in Ranpur, Paul Scott's fictional Indian city and railway junction, in 1943. The heroine of *The Raj Quartet*, Sarah Layton, is returning home, having recently entered what the author circuitously calls her "state of grace", thanks to the cynical attentions of a superannuated major in Calcutta. On the platform, she bumps into an acquaintance, the even more fictitious Russian Count Bronowski, who is the Nawab of Mirat's wazir, and who insists that she await her connecting train in the royal coach. Over champagne, he recalls how, as a young man in the south of France, he was approached by an adolescent Englishman, who sought his advice as to how best to make his addresses to a Spanish maid in the next door villa, with whom he had fallen in love. Could the Count perhaps supply him with a French poem? "Why not an English one?", the older man rejoins. The answer given is that the boy only knows one English poem, and he fears that it is not appropriate. Bronowski bids him recite it, and he does. The suit turns out to be unsuccessful, but the haunting verse has stayed with the now elderly Russian ever afterwards, and he declaims it, in a moment of great sensibility, to his guest in the railway carriage. Then the story moves on.

The poem is, of course, a cricket poem, and Hornby and Barlow used to open the batting for Lancashire. One match in which they did so was against Gloucestershire at Old Trafford in 1878, on which occasion a young man, Francis Thompson, was among the spectators. Theirs was a typical opening combination of carefree mercurial amateur and dour, unflinching professional, aggression and defence, resource and concentration—one of the earliest in the illustrious line of openers which would stretch over the ensuing decades to include Hobbs and Rhodes, Holmes and Sutcliffe, and Hutton and Washbrook; but it is the Lancashire pair who have achieved poetic immortality.

There are countless reasons why cricket lends itself to nostalgia, and a by-product of the fact that it does so is the extent and quality of its literature, entirely outmatching any other sport's. It is an obvious truth that the sport is played in the ephemeral English summer, and is inevitably associated with the golden days of that season. But there are also reasons inherent in the nature of the game itself. It comprises so many possible combinations of encounter and narrative—and in its first-class format, it takes on the shape of a three- or five-act play (each act subdivided into scenes); every match is a lived drama, complex, unpredictable, taking place over a leisured expanse of time, so that the deeds that each player remembers with advantages have sufficient time to impress themselves in memory's aspic—unlike the more violent, hurried or prosaic encounters of other sports. It is one of the reasons why modern one-day cricket is such an inferior product: whatever instant gratification 20:20 games afford, they are completely interchangeable and unmemorable, and they possess no perspective. By contrast, a Test or county match stretches out across past time, just as certain paintings—the winter estuaries of Avercamp, for example, or the framed colour memoirs of Howard Hodgkin—extend themselves in space (and so convey a sense of the receding or distant past). As a wise Frenchman once wrote (though not about cricket), the memory of a particular image is always but the longing for a certain moment. Harold Pinter well understood the potency of the link between cricket and time: he wrote an essay, published in 1969, called "Hutton and the Past", which contains what Michael Henderson has called the most evocative sentence in cricket literature: "That beautiful evening Compton made 70." He also wrote a miniature poem which captured the connection (and which his friend Simon Gray mordantly observed that he hadn't had time to finish): "I saw Len Hutton in his prime/Another time, another time." Old cricket recollections have the same sanctity as the memories of those long since dead. (Not that they are immune from pedantry or parody: two codgers watching a club game in deckchairs and I Zingari ties were once overheard in conversation, the first drawling with the uttermost slowness in the direction of his somnolent neighbour, "Do you remember Insole playing a very similar stroke—a little squarer perhaps—between lunch and tea, on the third day of the fourth Test—against South Africa, at Headingley—in 1955?" After a long pause, his companion replied, "No".)

There are times when it feels as if cricket must be as old as England itself, but this is one of nostalgia's illusions. Shakespeare knew nothing of the sport, then in its extreme infancy, but his works have been subsequently mined for proleptic cricket allusions, so that one finds cricket anthologies entitled "Sing all a green willow", while fanatics of the game are said, like the dying Falstaff, to have "babbled of green fields". A visit to the Long Room at Lord's confirms how English landscape

'There are times when it feels as if cricket must be as old as England itself, but this is one of nostalgia's illusions'



Francis Thompson in a 1902 woodcut: "A timid irresponsible zealot" but remembered gratefully by cricket-lovers

painting, which came of age later than its Dutch equivalent, might sometimes feature a cricket match, and the Augustan era, when such paintings were first made, is the time when cricket arose in the English soul, just as it came to fruition in the 19th century. Which brings us back to Hornby and Barlow, and the poet who remembered them—Francis Thompson.

The best essay on Thompson from a cricket point of view was written by Ronald Mason, who said that the poet died early "after a life of no very copious happiness". He was "a timid irresponsible zealot with [a] crippled will and suicidal inability to make terms with his own talents, preserved from final dereliction only by the devotion of friends." He was born, the son of a Preston doctor, in 1859, and lived the whole of his 47 years in a curious twilight of withdrawal, illuminated by a febrile imagination and a picturesque Roman Catholic faith. Low physical vitality and a congenital reluctance to concentrate his sensitive faculties upon uncongenial routines of whatever kind led him to failure after failure at school and college. Rejected for the priesthood and repelled by the drudgeries of medical study, he lapsed into pathological habits of sloth and opium. His days in Manchester were spent sleeping on benches, reading poetry in the public library—and watching cricket at Old Trafford. His sister was so infected with his recondite enthusiasm that she could remember the scores of old Lancashire matches even when she had been a nun for 30 years.

In the 1880s, Thompson came south to London, where he was engulfed in three years of misery, abandonment and degradation. He sold matches and newspapers, he blacked shoes, he wandered shiftlessly between doss-houses; he slept under newspapers on the Embankment. He lived for a time on the pickings of the Covent Garden vegetable carts, apparently indifferent to the possibility of salvation from family or friends. After finding lodgings with a prostitute, he was rescued more effectually, or at least more permanently, by his chance submission of some poems to a Catholic journal whose editor, Wilfred Meynell, took under his wing the wretched vagrant who appeared on his doorstep, housed him and in due course admitted him into the heart of his enormous family. Although from this time on, Thompson's life became more stable, he is nonetheless included, by those who care about such things, among the hundred people most likely to have been Jack the Ripper. For much of the time, he lived with the Meynells, but later spent long periods in religious retreats or in lodgings in North London, restored to respectability but not much more responsible or reliable than he had been in his down-and-out days. Gentle, helpless, exasperating, reverting by compulsion to the drug without which he could not maintain equanimity, the child-like, child-loving poet drifted dimly to his end. He died in 1907, weighing five stone, a few minutes walk away from the gates of Lord's. For a time, his posthumous reputation soared. Thompson's most famous poem "The Hound of Heaven" is an overlong but deeply-wrought description of the ineluctable power of divine love. It is to be found in Wavell's *Other Men's Flowers*, along with four other Thompson pieces, but unsurprisingly perhaps it is not to modern tastes, and poem and poet have fallen out of more recent anthologies.

It was probably in the last year of his life, as he neared what he called the "shadowy coast", that someone invited Thompson to go to Lord's to see Middlesex play Lancashire. His last years were reportedly enfeebled but calm, though he cannot have been free of pervasive regrets. According to E.V. Lucas, Thompson, having agreed to go to the match, found that when the time came it was more than he could do to face it. No one who loves cricket can contemplate with equanimity the idea of his agonised withdrawal. As Mason writes, "He could not bear to go to Lord's to watch the cricket, but not because it bored him, disappointed him, or disillusioned him"; instead, it was a case of "the hopelessness of a timid man sensitive enough to be aware of his inadequacy but able to acknowledge it only, not to overcome it. Embedded for ever in failure, he sets at a distance the vitality and beauty that he has never achieved, and calls them Hornby and Barlow. With their successors come in person to perform before him, he fears to go and see them. He does not want the bitter lesson rubbed in all over again." And so he stayed at home on that day in the summer of 1907, which was indeed his last, and wrote a poem—the poem for which he is remembered gratefully by all true lovers of cricket. Much of it is not very good, but Thompson must have known that in one verse he had created something more special, for he set it as the first, and repeated it as the last stanza of the poem which he poignantly called "At Lord's". No one would claim that this is great literature, but no cricket-follower, at least above a certain age, can read it without a pang, and it is warming to think that a make-believe Russian aristocrat is among the ranks of those whom the lines have moved.

> It is little I repair to the matches of the Southron folk,
> Though my own red roses there may blow;
> It is little I repair to the matches of the Southron folk,
> Though the red roses crest the caps, I know.
> For the field is full of shades as I near a shadowy coast,
> And a ghostly batsman plays to the bowling of a ghost,
> And I look through my tears on a soundless-clapping host
> As the run stealers flicker to and fro,
> To and fro:
> O my Hornby and my Barlow long ago!