

## **Walter Raymond – a guide to his works**

Alan Stone, January 2010

This is not a conventional list of the works of Walter Raymond. It is more of my personal journey through his works in the 18 months since I first discovered them. It is written from the notes I wrote about each book as I came across them and the impression they created on me. That in itself has been an uncompleted adventure. Somerset County Libraries have been the main source of getting hold of the books to read, supplemented by searching out books on line and from secondhand book shops and dealers, but within a very limited budget. There is still one book I have not got hold of and one I have so far chosen not to read. All in all however, it has been a most rewarding experience and a continued amazement that these works have for so long been ignored.

**Gentleman Upcott's Daughter.** 1893. Also published along with Sam and Sabrina as Good Souls of Ciderland (1901).

What little there is to read about Walter Raymond on the Internet suggests that I have started with one of his best. I was, of course, attracted to it by the title of Good Souls of Cider Land. This delightful rural tale is set in Camel Street (Queen Camel) near Yeovil. It is a love story between the son of a miserly miller and the daughter of a carter / smallholder – Gentleman Upcott, who is rather on his way down in the world but with high ideas of himself.

This book seems to really capture a good feel about 19<sup>th</sup> century rural life, any book where the first page includes a tribute to fine cider is likely to be a hit with me. It is set in a time probably about 50 years before it was written and it is supposed to be drawn on memories of the village of the author's youth. Although it contains an element of nostalgia and rural idyll it also is based in realism, though with a lighter touch than many depressing rural novels written at this time – more like the Hardy of Under the Greenwood Tree. Good fun and a joy throughout.

**In the Smoke of War.** 1895

A romance set in the turbulent countryside during the seventeenth century English Civil War. The setting is in a windmill on a hill near Langport. There is an obvious possible contender for a location at High Ham where one of the last thatched mills still survives. The climatic scene is in a battle that may well be based on the Battle of Langport which has been reenacted in recent years.

Cicely, the miller's daughter is faced with many trials. Her rebellious miller father John Durston (a lovely central Somerset name) is imprisoned. An unwanted but very practical suitor has to be handled and the relationship developed with her lover, an educated man but of the protestant religious bent.

It is an interesting and enjoyable take on the seventeenth century – though I would need to check on some of the historical accuracy. Possibly historical fiction is not Walter Raymond's strong point.

### **Young Sam and Sabina. 1894**

An excellent romance set in the heart of the Somerset moors, possibly based around Middledney a small village / hamlet, community. Note. Walter Raymond always referred to the 'Somerset Moors' they were never the 'Somerset Levels' though on a number of occasions he referred to 'the level moor'.

The book starts with a bucolic feel but with darker drama developing as the landscape imposes itself on the tale. Sam is the son of a yeoman farmer whilst Sabrina is the daughter of a 'dealer' a maverick who seems slightly wealthier than most of the local inhabitants. This provides the core tension of the novel, will Sabrina choose her childhood friend or will she be tempted by the attractions of another suitor.

Interesting sub plots, mix ups and misunderstandings all work themselves out with an ending that seemed slightly rushed – perhaps I just wanted the book to last longer.

### **Gossip Corner 1907**

Not a novel as such but more a vehicle to tell some tales of Somerset village life. The fictional village is called Honeycombe and would seem to either be based on Queen Camel or Marston Magna. Throughout the book the villagers meet at various places around the parish to gossip, natter and share tales. These tales are probably a mixture of embellished tales he had heard, remeniscences from his own experience and characters he has met and some of his own creation.

It contains a wonderful selection of characters and is a pleasant light read without ever having the strength of plot of a good novel. The most powerful story is probably 'At the village shop' and the story of Patricia Brook's recipe for her famed Easter Cake which she was reluctant to pass on as she grew old.

### **Love and the Quiet Life 1894**

Another novel set in a small community in the moors. This time the hamlet is called Sutton and contains a good mix of farming folk and village officials. It is set against the backdrop of the social unrest and tension created by the Captain Swing Riots and possibly reflects a slightly harsher rural scene.

Marion Burt is a 20-year-old girl living a very quiet life with her elderly father, a former clergyman struggling with his faith. She falls in love with an 'unsuitable' lover. Through many sub plots the village characters are developed and there is an element of belief in the supernatural. The dramatic ending does not provide the hoped for happy ending –

after all this is the late Victorian period where tragedy and melodrama were in fashion. However there is a good postscript.

### **Two Men of Mendip** – a play 1924

John Winterhead, a sociable yeoman farmer, mistakenly believes that Gyles Standerwick has murdered his neighbour, Joseph Pierce. His daughter Patty Winterhead falls in love with Gyles. The bleak Mendip hills and caves provide the imposing setting for this rather dark and dramatic tale. It is good theatre which could have gone either way through many twists and turns before we eventually reach a satisfactory outcome.

Some time after reading I sorted out that the play had been predated by a novel published in 1898 and rated by some as one of Walter Raymond's best. However this had supposedly had a tragic ending which he had modified for the theatre. I got the novel out of the library and over a couple of months made a few tries at reading it without ever getting into it. As a lover of happy endings I just could not face reading a tragedy knowing the tragic outcome when the alternative ending had worked so well.

### **The Book of Simple Delights** 1906

From the number available second hand this was probably his best selling book. It is first person account of a year in a cottage at Hazelgrove-Plucknett, based on Withypool on the edge of Exmoor, where he lived for a number of years but perhaps with passing reference to characters he knew at Preston Plucknet on the edge of Yeovil where he had previously lived.

Most of the chapters had previously appeared as magazine articles but intended from the start to form a 'little story of a summer holiday'. This was a style that he used in some of his best books, a slightly detached observer discovering the rural countryside and the people who lived and worked in it. The accounts have that charm of being fictionalized – but with a very strong root in reality and real people. One of the delights is the descriptions of Mrs Matthew Critchill, the widow woman who kept house for him.

At times it does tend to become a eulogy of nature, the descriptive writing of a naturalist – but still very enjoyable.

### **Tryphena in Love** 1895

A fascinating and slightly strange tale. It is set in a large bedchamber in an old farmhouse – meant to be based on a farm he knew well in Monatcute. John Pettigrew is a young man who is an invalid with limited movement and a rather active but naïve imagination. Tryphena is a young woman who as an orphan was part brought up as part of the family and is in part responsible for John's injuries. Her interesting mixture of responsibility and love for John is brought to the fore by the appearance of Miss Mervin who John idealises as his 'Portia'. She is a wealthy young lady who has come to live in the big house

(Montague House) and takes pity on John causing Tryphena to examine her feelings as she discovers jealousy.

As in *Love and the Quiet Life* the ending only comes clear in an Epilogue which probably means the novel lost some of its dramatic opportunity. It is still a fascinating and charming piece even if it did rather stretch my ideas of medical credibility.

**Walter Raymond** by Evelyn V Clark 1933

published together with a reprint of **Somerset and her Folk Movement** by Walter Raymond.

*Somerset and her Folk Movement* appears to be a rather unsubstantial essay written as a rally cry / support for the Folk movement which seems to have been very active in trying to conserve tales of old Somerset and in particular Somerset dialect in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Walter Raymond* by Evelyn Clark is a biographical tribute written by one of his friends and patrons within the folk movement in the year following his death. This text seems to focus far too much on his religion and philosophical side, which does not seem to have come through in his major periods of writing. It is all right as far as it goes but you do feel that he deserved a rather more structured and detailed study. It could be good project when I get time!

**Verity Thurston** 1926

Raymond's last novel and only major post war piece of fiction but which only seems to have been printed once and I had real trouble getting the library to find a copy. It does not seem to have been a critical success which is a shame as I found it a really good read.

Its tone is slightly different to his earlier work. Although still full of marvelous rural detail there is a slightly haunted feel to the landscape to reflect the inevitability of the tragedy. I felt something of the style of the Shropshire writer Mary Webb who was popular at this time.

As always the plot is very straightforward and obvious. Verity herself is the simple naïve country maid who falls for the rogue, Jack Merman. He is an interesting character with the fatal flaw which eventually leads to the death of Verity and his own downfall. It seems a shame such a substantial work has disappeared virtually without trace.

**The English Country Life** 1910

Another set of connected rural essays this time based around a year's stay in 'Sutton'. 'One of a number of that name so there is no chance of identifying which one.'

Some really superb writing in this book mixed with characters and humour. Mrs Darke's Dairy is an excellent account of the progression of the tradition of Farmhouse cheese

making written as a stream of gossip monologue. He uses this device again for his landlady and it is a very effective way of getting character across. There is a running storyline about the old cripple Jakey Barton and the attempts of yeoman farmer William Purchase to evict him from his cottage which, on its own, could have formed the base for a novel. It is a book which celebrates rural custom and sadly observes its passing. The chapter on the harvest is another good example.

My 1924 copy of this book includes a set of paintings by the artist Wilfred Ball. It suggests that the book was reasonably successful – perhaps the lack of Somerset in the title helped it appeal to a wider audience. However I found the illustrations slightly disappointing – they could have been anywhere in rural England and quite clearly were not of Somerset.

### **No Soul above Money** 1899

The best plot of a Raymond novel I have yet come across. Many twists and turns which although obvious were not as blatantly signposted as in other novels. It was written with good pace and kept me gripped as a reader, a page turner.

It is a tragedy set in the reign of Queen Anne in the wild countryside between Wincanton, Bruton and Castle Cary. It is the story of the White family, Rizpah the mother and her two sons William and Jack. And of the miser Jacob Handsford and his daughter Ursie. Rural tradition and superstition form a constant backdrop.

After reading I discovered that ‘Jack Whites Gibbet’ is a local legend and Raymond had taken elements of this to form his fictitious tale. More about the legend of Jack White’s Gibbet can be found in the Somerset Folklore Society’s year book for 1922.

### **The Idler out of Doors.** 1901

Raymond was well ahead of the current popularity of Idler books. The first chapter of this book was detail on fly-fishing which I found a bit slow. However, after that the book picked up pace as he settled into this new style of writing. I think this was the first of his rural observation books. He, the idler, wanders around the countryside commenting on the people, characters and crafts he came across.

I particularly liked the chapter ‘In search of an old man’ set around Wedmore with one hilarious conversation with three old men in a pub. It was also a good book for local topography with the chapter Brean Down and the Berrow sand dunes of particular note. The chapter ‘In and Old Porch’ takes you by surprise as you are led into reading a story without realizing it.

### **Under the Chestnut Tree.** 1928

This was Raymond’s swan song, published by his friends of the Somerset Folklore Society after apparently being rejected by a number of other publishers. It is a reprise of

his style of the early 1900's, the detached first person observing and getting involved in rural happenings. Some of it is ground that appears to have been covered before in earlier works.

Evelyn Clark, in the brief biography she wrote only five years later suggests that this set of tales was more autobiographical than his other works. The first two chapters on his early life clearly appear to be so but it is always difficult to be sure where creative fiction cuts in.

Possibly this book does not read as well as some of his other works – the use of dialect appears far more self conscious than in his earlier works. He seems to go over the top at times making it harder to read.

### **The Revenues of the Wicked. 1911**

What an awful title for a lovely book. It is set on Exmoor with bleak sea fogs alternating with lush green farming as the backdrop. This is the story of Tamsin / Thomasine Scutt whose dotting parents had brought her up to be above her station in life. Surprisingly it is not Tamsin who turns out to be the 'wicked' of the title remaining a pleasant amiable innocent until the end.

In this nicely paced tale, with the usual rich mixture of country characters, the tension mounts well. As is usual Raymond signposts some aspects too early but the eventual outcome is well justified by the plot. The description of the shearing party at the beginning of the book is particularly good.

### **Book of Crafts and Character. 1907**

A series of essays only linked by a common theme rather than narrative as with most of his rural reminiscences. It contains 30 pen portraits of very much equal length (where they magazine articles?) and a bit on the short side. I was slightly disappointed by the chapter on cider making, but only as I had such high expectations of what Raymond could have written on a subject that is a constant theme through his books.

The majority of the articles were about country characters, old men and the various ways they found to eke out a living once past useful working life. The old stone cracker, the old snail merchant and the old mole catcher being excellent examples. These were characters really in touch with their landscape in a time of much change. The repeated theme of their children having left the land to go to the cities is constantly questioned by Raymond as to whether life is really any better in the cities.

### **A School / Short History of Somerset. 1906**

Something a bit different, probably written to order for a publisher as part of a series of county histories. I found the writing style a bit stilted, particularly the use of the second person when he tries to directly talk to his youthful audience.

It is, as it says on the cover, a history of Somerset from prehistoric times. The prehistoric information is charmingly out of date given our modern level of knowledge. However in some later chapters he really gets involved with his subject and allows legend and feeling to come through rather than objective history. He is good on King Arthur, excellent on King Alfred and his chapters on 'The Battle of Sedgemoor' and the 'Bloody Assizes' are well worth reading.

### **Fortunes Darling 1901**

A tale of two estates and a misplaced inheritance. New money versus old money and a love entanglement where the value of love versus money forms the tension. There are many sub plots and the best characters come in the shape of the local Mayor, Aldermen, councilors and professionals of the local town, Bristlington, on the coaching route to Bristol. It could be Chippenham or maybe Keynsham but I am not sure. It doesn't really seem to matter.

The lack of a strong sense of topography and the fact that Raymond had left the farming folk and labouring classes behind seems to have taken a bit of the charm out of the book. It is in places a very good read, the plot works very hard and there are some fine descriptions of woods, fields and the passing of the seasons but to me something seems to be lacking.

### **John and Jacob 1905**

What a good book. I am not sure it would quite replace Gentleman Upcott's daughter as my favorite but this is a much more substantial work – probably Raymond's best. Although there were a few aspects of predictability there were many unexpected twists and turns and at many times I found the tension about unbearable. I was almost skim reading in some sections as I tried to find out what happened.

It was a sequel to 'No soul above money' but stands fully in its own right. The characterisation is as strong as any I had come across in any of his books. Hannah Peach is perhaps the most striking and complex character he created. Barbara was an excellent heroine. Jacob was a consistently awkward miser who you nearly had sympathy for but not quite. Rick Viller was an excellent villain and the background cast was equally strong. Particularly the amusing three generations of Mogg, Old Simon, Simon and Young Simon and their amazing talent to think and speak alike.

The book is again set in the wild country south of Bruton and the town itself has a role to play. It is also an excellent portrait of rural Somerset. Dairy, Orchard, the farming year and, of course, particularly cider come through very strongly.

An excellent book which is virtually unobtainable.

### **A Wayfaring Soul. 1913**

What a disappointment. I suppose I was half expecting it after reading his biography. He may have considered it one of his more important works – but I really feel that the ‘dear friend who made me write it’ needed shooting.

A reflective load of drivel about entering a state of enlightenment. It is claimed to be autobiographical and some of the incidents do appear in other works. I suspect there were a few aspects of his life he had not been proud of – an early love let down and working for money – but he has distorted and exaggerated them to turn himself into some sort of greed driven devil who needed to find salvation.

It is a painfully turgid read with only the odd flash of his usual pleasant style. Not my type of book at all.

### **Misterton’s Mistake 1889**

Walter Raymond’s first novel, and to be honest it shows. A long and wide ranging social comedy which contains many of the seeds of his later writing along with some not so good. It could have done with some serious editing.

The first third of the book, set in Wyncheley (Muchleney), is fine. Rural characters and the budding romance between Henry John Misterton and Edith Grimes. Then through some uncreditable stroke of immense luck Misterton gains a fortune and the plot moves him to London society and the Mullet family. The book now loses most of its rural charm and for a long time moves painfully slowly as Misterton gradually falls for the charms of Annie Mullet.

In the last third of the book the pace picks up alarmingly. It is good fun but the many twists of plot and amazing co-incidences do rather overstretch the reader’s creditability. In the last three short chapters Misterton joins the army, fights a campaign overseas, rescues Edith in a ship wreck, discovers the Mulletts have not only been ruined financially but have ruined him and that Anne his errant wife has died of cholera in Italy – ‘It was very sudden’! It all sort of ties together for a happy ending but much is left to implication.

Still it is all good fun. The love of Somerset and the character of the moors come over very strongly and it is certainly a precursor of the much finer work to follow it.

### **Charity Chance. 1896**

I had expected to be disappointed but was not. His biography had suggested this was a mid 1890’s weak novel, I am not sure I agree. It may have not have been a favourite with his fans as it not about the countryside and rural characters with the exception of John Sprake.



I think the setting is Lynton and Lynmouth on the North Devon coast which is portrayed as a rather middle class small town. The plot circulates around a wealthy widow, Miss Graham and her aspirations for her nephew Graham Poltimore and Charity Chance the workhouse girl she has adopted and brought up as her own. It is largely a social comedy with some biting humour and observations as the evils of wealth and greed are explored.

The writing is sharp, very readable and with good pace. The plot, although tinged with tragedy and Victorian melodrama manages to work around to a satisfactory conclusion. I would have preferred it if the last chapter had gone at a slightly slower pace – I had to read it twice to make sure I understood what the ending was. Rushing endings is a repeated trait of Raymond.

### **The Good Souls of Ciderland 1901**

As well as Gentleman Upcott and Sam and Sabrina this collection also contained two short stories **Son of a Saint** and **A complete change** – okay but nothing special.

### Other works

I think the only published book I have yet to read is **Taken at his word** Raymond's second novel published in 1892. On Amazon an 1899 novel is available in print on demand reprint basis named as **A tangled web** – although I haven't forked out to confirm it I assume this is an American title for one of his other works – probably 'No Soul above Money'. As it mentions in his biography that Raymond was not the most organised person in keeping track of his work it is more than probable that during his decades as a jobbing writer there are numerous articles and short stories appearing in other journals. As he is known to have used pseudonyms (Mistertons Mistake was originally written by 'Tom Cobbliegh') tracking these down could be a problem. If anyone knows of any I would love to hear from them.

Alan Stone - [sheptonhistory@btinternet.com](mailto:sheptonhistory@btinternet.com)

Copyright material - please do not use without permission