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**English Heritage Blue Plaque Unveiling for Arthur Hugh Clough, February 3, 2010:
Clough Symposium, University College London/ Dr. Williams's Library, London**

THE CHANGING REPUTATION OF CLOUGH'S *THE BOTHIE* (1848)

Patrick Scott, *University of South Carolina*

It is amazing that it has taken very nearly 150 years for Clough to get a mere blue plaque. This is a paper about the vicissitudes of Clough's critical reputation, based on the changing reputation of just one of his major poems, but I don't really like the idea that literary judgment is a kind of stock-market in which shrewd or foolish young critics, like some bookdealers or collectors, gamble on how others will regard an author in five or ten years time. The value of literature is not just a matter of speculation: literature of value recurrently attracts readers, as Clough's poetry has now attracted readers in each generation for the past 150 years.

There are now over 800 blue plaques in London, over eighty for poets. Even without ladling scorn on the no-doubt equally worthy actors, and architects, and artists, and dentists, and dance-band leaders and deceased Olympic runners whose residences are thus memorialized, it does seem a little hard that, among the eighty poets, Clough should have waited longer than Edwin Arnold or Austin Dobson or Theodore Watts-Dunton or Oscar Wilde's mother.

Of course, part of Clough's attraction has always been that he was not securely canonical as a poet, that he was not Tennyson, not Browning, not even Arnold or Hopkins. The dominant trope in Clough criticism, from the publication of his first books, has always been that of discovery, of doing justice to the undervalued and indeed

unknown. In 1849, William Michael Rossetti commented on *The Bothie* “that public attention should have been so little engaged by this poem is a fact . . . somewhat remarkable” (CH 64). After his death in 1861, the *Saturday Review* reported that Clough left “a very high reputation in a very narrow circle” (CH, 101), the *North British Review* reported that in his lifetime his knowledge of his work had been “confined to the old friends of the author, or a small circle of admirers (CH 175-176), while Charles Eliot Norton told American readers of the *Atlantic Monthly*: Outside the circle of his friends his reputation had no large extent; . . . his writings are but little known by the great public of readers” (CH 125).

And the trope of discovery, or at least rediscovery and revaluation, was repeated by Symonds and Sidgwick in the later 1860s, by Hutton and Robertson in the later Victorian period, by Humbert Wolfe and Michael Roberts in between the wars, and then almost ritually in the swelling publications on Clough in the post-war decades, following the first great Clarendon edition of 1951 and the expansion of the US graduate schools. And the trope lives on, as in Vanessa Ryan’s 2003 essay for *Victorian Poetry*, reporting for “a new generation of Clough scholars” who are “seeking to restore him to the canon.”

I used to get impatient with this trope, once writing “it is time for Clough to be discovered less, and read more” [“The Victorianism of Clough,” in *Victorian Poetry*, 1978]. It certainly seems odd repeatedly to claim that a poet is under-recognized when, over the past half century alone, there have been two full-scale editions of his collected poems, scholarly editions of individual works and some well-edited selections, a two-volume edition of his letters, a selected edition

of his prose, a scholarly edition of the most substantial run of diaries and notebooks, primary and secondary bibliographies, three serious modern biographies, and really quite a lot of critical books and essays. But we don't read Clough in the same way as previous generations, and it may be that we could still benefit by rediscovering how he used to be read.

We all have our own stories of discovering Clough. Though I'd been taught when I was much younger the recitation piece "Say not the struggle," I first discovered Clough as a teenager (through David Newsome's book on Victorian education), and I began to explore his poetry in my first year as an undergraduate, at a time when the 1951 *Poems* and Mulhauser's *Letters* were still cheap enough for a student to buy. Partly I suppose from the way the 1951 edition was arranged, it was the shorter poems that first engrossed me, and then *The Bothie*.

Clough's *The Bothie of Toper-na-Fuosich*, first published in 1848, was long taken as the quintessential Cloughian poem, but is increasingly recognized as having an anomalous role within Clough's *oeuvre*. It differs from his other long poems first of all in the story of its composition. Unlike any of the others, it was written rapidly, in less than six weeks, though incorporating odd lines jotted down a couple of years before. Unlike Clough's other long poems, it was published immediately, rather than posthumously, or after a long period of self-distancing, rethinking, and redrafting. And although Clough later revised it, he revised it within the same general structure, or framework. This distinctive composition history clearly relates to its fundamental difference from all Clough's other long poems, at least before *Mari Magno*: although it incorporates individual voices—

Philip, Adam, Hobbes, Elspie--, *The Bothie* is distinct in being a third-person authorial narrative, told through a single confident impersonal voice, rather than leaving Clough's readers to discern the Voice among the voices of multiple characters.

It differs also in its publication history. I was struck by W.Y. Sellars's later comment on "the uncouth shape" in which *The Bothie* had first been sent into the world. It was first published in a non-standard seemingly-ephemeral format (large octavo, paper wrappers), from an Oxford publisher, by contrast with the standard small octavo, cloth boards and London imprint of *Ambarvalia*. It is this publication difference, I think, that lends some plausibility to W. M.

Rossetti's assertion in 1850 that it wasn't initially as well known as the shorter poems, at least in London literary circles. But through Emerson's interest it was very soon republished in America, and until after Clough's death it was the only separately-published book of poetry on either side of the Atlantic to carry his name. In contrast to *Ambarvalia*, *The Bothie* even made some profit for its publisher. When in the late 1850s, Norton proposed an American collection of his poetry, Clough worked hard to revise *The Bothie* for Norton's volume. That revision provided the text also for Mrs. Clough's posthumous London editions, from 1862 onwards, and some at least of Clough's cutting of local Oxonian allusion, and even slight bowdlerization, may have been influenced by the expectations of his American readership.

The Bothie continued to hold its chronological position as the lead poem in collected and selected editions, well into the twentieth century. In the late

nineteenth century, it was the only one of Clough's longer poems out of copyright and so the only one available for reprinting by publishers other than Macmillan.

It is worth noting the prominence given it in, for instance, the Ernest Rhys Canterbury Poets Clough in the 1880s (with a photogravure frontispiece of the Highlands) and W. T. Stead's Penny Poets in the 1890s (when the poem was catchily retitled *The Love story of a Young Man*). Subsequently, it lost its preeminence. The last truly-separate publication of *The Bothie* before my own 1976 Queensland edition was the reissue in early 1862, just after his death, of newly-bound sheets, unsold since 1848.

The critical history of *The Bothie* also differs from that of Clough's work as a whole. It was the dominant poem in late Victorian perceptions of Clough, among all except the most devoted followers, through perhaps to the Great War. Thereafter through most of the twentieth century it has been eclipsed or displaced by *Amours de Voyage*, while in recent decades criticism has seemed to me increasingly to take *Dipsychus* as the central or normative text through which to read the other poems. The former centrality of *The Bothie* has certainly been lost: while all modern selections, and Christopher Ricks's *New Oxford Book of Victorian Poetry*, include *Amours de Voyage*, in the two best recent selections, by McCue and Phelan, *The Bothie* has yielded place to, respectively, *Adam and Eve* and *Dipsychus*. *The Bothie* continues to draw critics and critical debate, but often as an early, naïve, flawed work, a prentice stage or even misstep on the way towards the other poems. That this is so says as much about us as about Clough.

The poem's initial success was as an Oxford poem, an insider poem, enthusiastically received by those who knew and liked its author and who felt themselves to be of his generation. Diehards anxious to prove their classical purity attacked Clough's hexameters (and this debate was for a while in the early 1850s the chief thing keeping critical attention alive), and a few dons suspicious of a colleague of known radical sympathies who had resigned from religious scruple were reported as judging it "indecent and profane, immoral and communistic" (*Corr* I:240). But almost everyone else praised it fulsomely: Thackeray wrote to say he was "charmed with it," Emerson thought it "a high gift from the angels," Longfellow found it "altogether fascinating," Kingsley puffed it as "genial and manly." and Mrs. Browning wrote to Miss Mitford that it was "full of vigour and freshness."

The subsequent, later Victorian, history of the poem's reputation takes its cue from these beginnings, and in the years after Clough's death made the poem central to understanding his work. By contrast with *Amours or Dipsychus*, *The Bothie* was positive and confident, and perhaps also unthreatening, in the prospects it offered for progress in politics, continued religious hopefulness, and idealism in love. Its worldview as well as its setting seemed more rooted, more English. In a sense, a poem that was Clough's own elegy on a stage in his life he was leaving behind became after his death a filter through which he, and the rather difficult view of life he represented, could be remembered more comfortably.

The Cambridge philosopher Henry Sidgwick, who did not himself rate the poem as Clough's best, attributes "the success of *The Bothie*," as contrasted with *Amours de Voyage*, to its 'buoyant and vivacious humour,' though also noting "the flexibility of [Clough's] metre," and "the ease and completeness" of his character sketches (CH 284-286). We can recognize all this still, though one also notes how much that we now foreground in the poem this misses out. Where, however, the late Victorian popular regard for the poem differs most from current discussion is noted in another of Sidgwick's slightly acerbic observations, that "the descriptions of natural history in *The Bothie* form probably the best-known and most popular part of Clough's poetry" (CH286). If we now notice the descriptions of landscape at all, it is to put them in context, to read them against the false consciousness of tourism and the occluded history of the highland clearances, or to psychologize them, making each pool, eddy or spate emblematic of the characters' inner tensions. Insofar, of course, as the poem was elegiac in intent, Clough's own elegy on the life he was quitting when he left Oxford, sentiment was not out of place.

Subsequent criticism has often played against, written in correction of, this late Victorian blanding of the poem. J. M. Robertson stressed the psychological inwardness of Clough's characterization, praising both *The Bothie* and *Amours de Voyage* as "in essence works of narrative, analytical, psychological fiction" (CH 351). Maurice Hewlett, in the early 1920s, under the headline "Teufelsdröckh in Hexameters," read the poem as Carlylean social critique, a theme followed up by Michael Timko. A whole slew of critiques, from

Lady Chorley and Walter Houghton onwards, have focused on the imagery in Elspie's dream and thence asserted the poem to be unVictorian in its treatment of sexuality, a theme followed up by John Goode and Michael Mason, and foregrounded in the title of Rupert Christiansen's short book about Clough as *The Voice of Victorian Sex*. In John Schad's very interesting meditation on Clough and religion, *The Bothie* only figures because Philip's injunction to dig can be connected with death and interment. In the passages that recent critics have chosen for quotation, once a critic gets past the mock-epic of the opening, the choice has typically lighted on lines from individual characters, especially Philip, rather than on lines from the narrator. In commentary on metre, we generally stress the conversational effect rather than the epic or pastoral passages, and in commentary on style we now stress the colloquial rather than the poetic.

This shift in focus, with *The Bothie* losing its normative role, and being read through Clough's other and later poetry, has affected even critics who seek to place the poem in the broader context of Victorian studies. Where Victorian readers, Emerson, and J. C. Shairp, reacted negatively to the ending "or non-ending" of *Amours de Voyage*, many recent critics react against *The Bothie* as being too neatly wrapped up. Goode, for instance, reading Clough's major poetry against the Revolutions of 1848, balks at the ending of *The Bothie* as unrealistic, taking Philip "away from the roots of society" (Goode 69). Isobel Armstrong, after a brilliant sustained analysis of Clough's analogies between the twin currencies of language and money, also finds the poem's ending tricky to repackage positively, because "Philip sidesteps Chartism" (Armstrong 196): I'm

exhilarated by the hyperbole with which Armstrong praises Clough, but I'm not sure I can follow her in the claim that "the linguistic inventiveness of ambiguity" "solves the problem" of political intervention (Armstrong 185). Matthew Reynolds, by contrast, reads *The Bothie*, not against Clough, but through a line of emergent national epic, and concludes that, by contrast with for instance, *Aurora Leigh*, it constitutes "a large and serious joke," where "the personal offers resistance to political understanding" (Reynolds 140-141). Most recently, in his review of the Kenny biography, Daniel Karlin went further: "After reading *Amours de Voyage*," he wrote, "you know in your bones that *The Bothie* was meant to end unhappily" (*TLS*, January 13, 2006, 4). One is tempted to add, Miss-Prismatically, "that is what literature means," but literature didn't mean that in *The Bothie*'s critical heyday.

We live in the same world as Clough, but not the same intellectual world as he lived in. When he was ill late in his life, and he went abroad and Blanche went to Combe Hurst, and they sublet that house on St. Mark's Crescent where the plaque was just unveiled, Blanche made two overlapping inventories of the books they were leaving behind for their tenant. There is a significant mismatch between the books Clough owned and the authors we now use as intertexts in reading his work. In the thirties, the index to Goldie Levy's neglected critical book cited Dakyns, Dana, and Dumas; in the 60s, Wendell Harris references Darwin, Dickens, and Emily Dickinson; in the 90s, Warwick Slinn has multiple index entries for de Man and Derrida. But Clough's library list has six separate entries for editions of Demosthenes. And the same would go, *mutatis mutandis*,

for *The Bothie*. Aside from Sir Anthony Kenny himself, which Clough critic now shares the classicism of Clough's knowledge, *The Bothie*'s assumed book world, of Thicksides or Thookydid, of Hairy Stotle, Homer, and Horace, of Virgil and Theocritus?

So what would I value in *The Bothie* now? Of course, the satire, and the intermixed colloquialism of style, and the social observation, and the moral commitment, and the acute treatment of sexual attraction and love and the prospect of marriage. And I would recognize also that the criticism of the past fifty years, much more than that of the preceding century, has brought out depths and complexities and doubts and ironies within a poem that once appeared sunny and unproblematical. But we lose something if we dissolve the poem into these conflicting elements, and do not hold them in tension with the overarching narrative and narrative voice that make the poem untypical of Clough's work.

The three normative passages for me, in *The Bothie*, are not now the opening games and dinner, or the love scene with Elspie, or even the mock-Puginian debate over the male undergraduates' attitudes to highland lassies. Almost all of these have dated in ways that make them at best ideologically ambiguous. The three passages on which I would now ground a claim to the poem's value would be these:

(1) Philip's refusal in Book 9, lines 78-95, of the Carlylean, and Arnoldian, and Newmanian, coercive metaphor of the Battle of Life:

If there is battle, 'tis battle by night: I stand in the darkness . . .

Neither battle I see, nor arraying, nor King in Israel,

Only infinite jumble and mess and dislocation . . .

(2) as counterbalance, the portrayal of Liverpool at dawn from Book 9, lines 111-136, where:

. . . the whole great wicked artificial civilized fabric,--
 All its unfinished houses, lots for sale, and railway outworks,--
 Seems reaccepted, resumed to Primal Nature and Beauty.

And finally

(3) the narrator's conclusion, sweeping aside the allegory of Rachel-and-Leah and golden weddings and iron bedsteads, into a narrative that despite its biblical resonance and its focus on Philip's life more than Elspie's is nonetheless a vision, an narrative of life in this world:

. . . with books, and two or three pictures,
 Toolbox, plough, and the rest, they rounded the sphere to New Zealand.
 There he hewed and dug; subdued the earth and his spirit;
 There he built him a home; there Elspie bare him his children, . . .
 And the Antipodes too have a Bothie of Toper-na-Fuosich.

Rather than *The Bothie* being a poem of Clough's youth, of the life he rejected and moved on from and in some ways saw through, *The Bothie* seems to me, in all three of these passages, a poem quite fundamental to the whole arch or curve of Clough's life, and to the poetry he would write in the following years. Certainly it is a poem that still repays reading and deserves continuing, more fully informed, and perhaps less skeptical, critical interrogation.