

A.E.COPPARD – TELLING TALES

Introduction: The Blank Register

The story around my father is a deep and troubled one. His step-grandfather stepped in and married my grandmother after his real father disappeared at or before his birth in 1932. There is no record of the real father in the church records and my father retains his mother's maiden name of Belcher, as do I. This question mark over his missing father haunted my father all his life but I never confronted him about it. I was sworn to silence on the subject by my mother until today as both my parents have passed on.

By coincidence a writer called A.E. Coppard left my father's village, which at the time barely contained 300 people, in April 1932 (my father was born in a Wallingford hospital on April 13th 1932). A local history publication called *Three Wittenham Writers* by historian Katherine Burke Jewess¹ alerted me to the possibility there might be a connection genetically in the early 1990s. In March 2005 a mutual friend and poet (Maura Dooley) put me in contact with the Coppard family which resulted in the grandsons of A.E.Coppard visiting Long Wittenham.²

The possibility of a DNA test to prove once and for all if there was a connection was discussed. A forensic scientist advised us that a DNA test would never prove conclusively a connection but A.E. Coppard's daughter Julia Reisz suggested that there was 'a very high probability' of my being his grandson. A.E. Coppard has subsequently grown both as a ghostly influence on my writing with several poems³ exploring this 'legacy' and more recently as an artistic influence too as I now begin to explore the short story form. The direct artistic influence of his work is discussed in the 'Literary Influence' section below. He has been described by many as a master of the form.

¹ Kathleen Burk Jewess, *Three Wittenham Writers* (Long Wittenham: Wittenham Women's Institute, 1984)

² Shaun Belcher, 'Searching for A.E.Coppard', *Shaun Belcher Website*, (2014)
<http://www.shaunbelcher.com/coppard> [accessed 1 December 2014] (para. 6 of 8).

³ Belcher, 'Searching for A.E.Coppard', (para. 4 of 8)

TERROIR: Knowing my place.

Even if A.E. Coppard has no genetic connection to me his work forms part of a wider 'regionalist' set of influences which entwine the personal and the political directly and have influenced my writing. His writing forms part of a wider early modernist rural movement in English literature. I share a similar attitude and relationship to the notion of 'metropolitan' elites and establishment 'gate-keepers' of writing and especially, because of its physical proximity, to the influence of 'Oxbridge' and its dominance of British Literary success. My writing 'persona' has instinctively shunned such things. In this I draw strength from A.E. Coppard and Robert Gibbings and their take on the rural landscape they lived and worked in. For me this links directly to the way a range of artists and writers identify and explore their territory or '*terroir*'.

I feel especially drawn to this description of Les A. Murray the Australian poet which describes his famous essay *On sitting back and thinking about Porter's Boeotia* from *The Peasant Mandarin*⁴

In an influential public literary debate with the poet Peter Porter, he has characterised this according to classical models as a Boetian-Athenian dichotomy, with Murray arguing that Australian poetry is – or should be – Boetian: that is, unadorned, traditional, and resistant to literary fashions...⁵

This 'non-metropolitan' outlook has echoes for me in writers as diverse as Seamus Heaney, Philip Larkin, Peter Reading, William Nicholson and Scottish regionalists like Sorley Maclean, Norman McCaig and William Neill. In a more contemporary mode there are aspects of my work that now engage with the specific travelogue/psycho-geographies of Iain Sinclair, W.G. Sebald and Patrick Keiller. The poetry of place, or poetry of region has been one of my long-standing obsessions. That the emotional and intellectual borders of that 'terroir' overlap with the history and output of Coppard, Gibbings and the Golden Cockerel Press and Paul Nash's art is an affirmative for me especially in its intertwining of the visual and written word.

⁴ Les Murray, *The Peasant Mandarin*, (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1978).

⁵ Australian Poetry Library, 'Les Murray biography', *Australian Poetry Library*,(2014).

<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/murray-les> [accessed 1 December 2014] (para. 8 of 8).

Literature Review: The Published Works

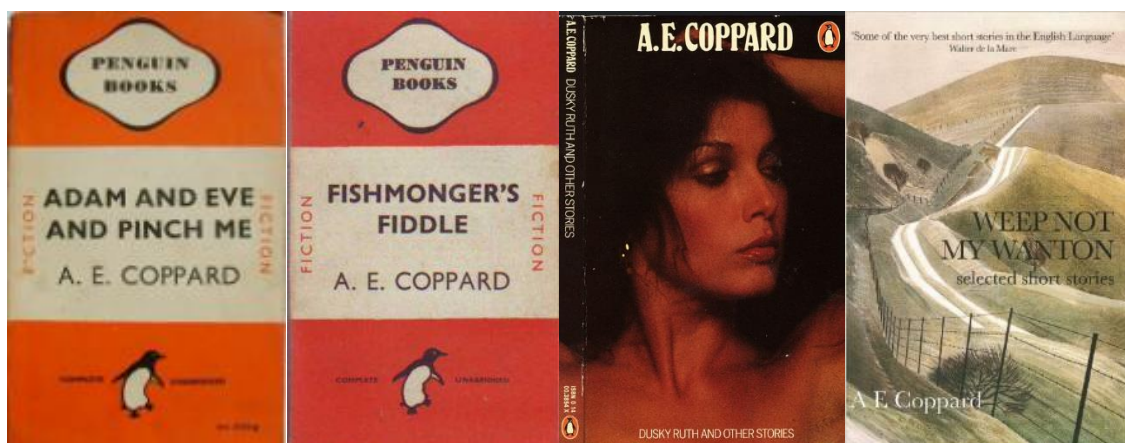


Figure.1 Various Penguin Paperback Book Covers.

A.E. Coppard is almost unread now despite being regarded as a master of the short story in his own lifetime and frequently being anthologised in ‘*Best Short Story*’ selections. Between 1921 and the first publication *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me* and the final posthumous autobiography there are over 30 publications (including many selected and collected editions). Mostly short stories but also three volumes of poetry (two in the UK one in the USA) and a *Collected Poems* from Jonathan Cape in 1928. Alfred Knopf New York published a *Collected Tales* in 1951 which consisted of an author’s forward and 38 tales although he actually wrote over 200 so it is an authorial ‘selection’. Many of The Golden Cockerel Editions were small run single editions and his letters and first drafts are now prized by collectors or deposited in archives mostly in the U.S.A.

Because of copyright issues his tales have also in the last ten years started to appear under the ‘supernatural’ and uncanny category in what are sometimes dubious editions which makes a full bibliography difficult to complete. Until the *Weep Not My Wanton* ⁶selected edition from Turnpike Books in 2013 his work could only be found in out of print Penguin paperback editions such as the *Dusky Ruth and Other Stories* ⁷selection of 1974. This particular edition (see illustration above) tied in with a Granada TV series of episodes of *The Watercress Girl*, *The Higgler* and *The Field of Mustard* stories as part of a series of adaptations of Coppard and H.E.Bates stories called *Country Matters*.⁸

⁶ A.E.Coppard, *Weep Not My Wanton: Selected Short Stories*, (London: Turnpike Books, 2013).

⁷ A.E.Coppard, *Dusky Ruth and other stories*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1974).

⁸ Koch Vision, *Country Matters*, (New York: Koch Vision, 2008) [on DVD].

Political Writing:

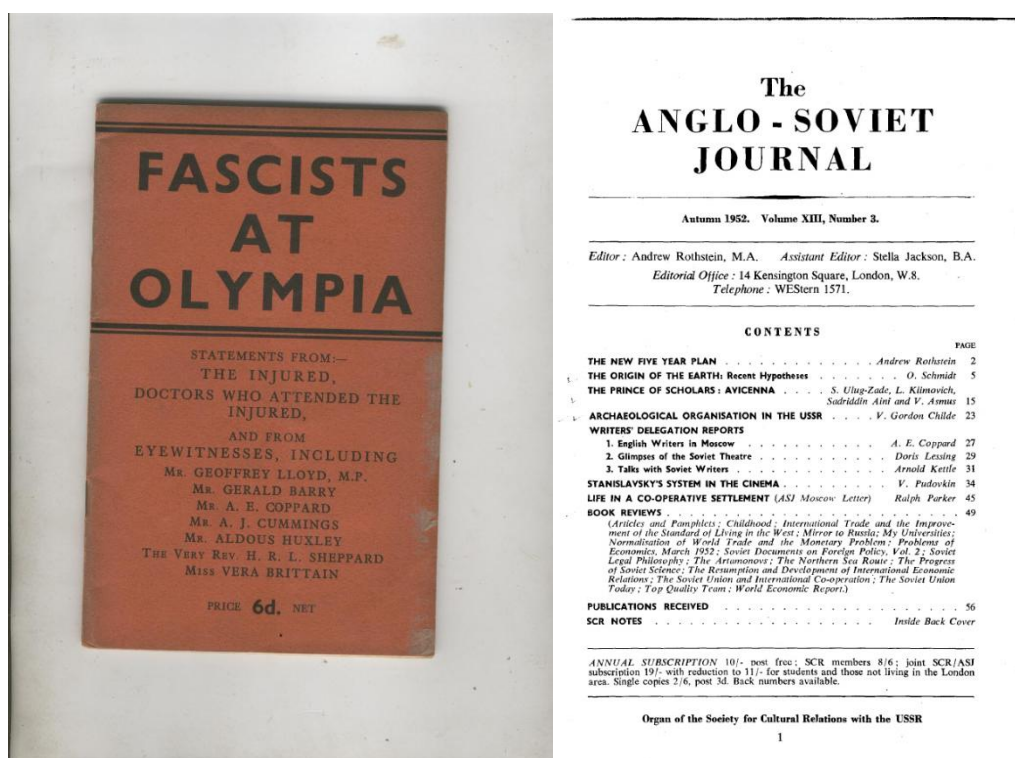


Figure 2. The *Fascists at Olympia* 1934 and *Anglo-Soviet Journal* 1952.

Throughout his life Coppard was interested in politics being both a parish councillor and an Independent Labour Party member. He featured in at least two politically inspired publications. His eye-witness account of injuries suffered by opponents of *Fascists at Olympia*⁹ when anti-fascist groups disrupted a 12,000 strong fascist rally was included in the book of the same name published by Victor Gollancz in 1934. His contribution sat alongside writing by Aldous Huxley and Vera Brittan.

He also contributed a piece on a visit to Russia in 1952 where the visiting writers included Doris Lessing and the party met with Joseph Stalin who one 'older writer' according to Lessing said spoke truthfully about what he had seen in Russia which was a brave thing to do. It may have been Coppard who was known to speak his mind and who would have been 73 years old at this point. His actual article was pro-soviet when published in the *Anglo-Soviet Journal* in Autumn 1952¹⁰.

⁹ 'Vindicator' [H.T. Hopkinson]. *Fascists at Olympia*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934).

¹⁰ A.E.Coppard, 'English Writers in Moscow' in *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, Autumn 1952, Vol XIII, No.3. 27-29.

Critical Writing:

His work was the subject of literary reviews when published but there has been no definitive critical study or biography which leaves only own highly dubious posthumous autobiography *It's me, Oh Lord!*¹¹ from 1957 which was published after his death. By general consensus this appears to be as much a work of fiction as any of his tales.

1921-1945 Ford Maddox Ford to H.E.Bates.

Coppard's work was published in a wide variety of journals including *The Dial*, *the Criterion*, *English review* etc. Ford Maddox Ford was an early supporter by featuring him in early editions of the *Transatlantic Review*¹²

.. hitherto no English prose writer has had the fancy, the turn of imagination, the wisdom, the as it were piety, and the beauty of the great seventeenth-century lyricists like Donne or Herbert – or even Herrick. And that peculiar quality is the best thing that England has to show.

Ford Maddox Ford quoted in Coppard entry in D.N.B.

He was also published in the *Criterion* under the editorship of T.S.Eliot in 1925.

Other critical literature before 1945 is fairly thin and mostly occurred just before the Second World War perhaps reflecting the most critically successful part of his output. Commentators generally regard his post-war output as being weaker. There is a 1933 guide¹³ to his First editions which reflects the small press desirability of the works for The Golden Cockerel Press and an attempt at a Bibliography in 1931¹⁴ but almost no other extant literary analysis to draw upon except a 1932 dissertation in the U.S.A.¹⁵ An Argentinian attempt at an analysis of style was produced in 1944¹⁶ but it is almost 30 years before the next dissertation was attempted. The most extensive critical commentary came during the second world war when H.E. Bates dedicated a whole chapter in his study 'The Modern English Short Story, a critical survey' from 1941 to Coppard's writing.¹⁷

¹¹ A. E. Coppard, *It's me, O Lord! : an abstract & brief chronicle of some of the life with some of the opinions of A. E. Coppard, written by himself*, (London: Methuen, 1957).

¹² B. J. Poli, *Ford Maddox Ford and the Transatlantic Review*, (Syracuse University Press: Syracuse, 1967).

¹³ G. H. Fabes, *The first editions of A. E. Coppard, A. P. Herbert and Charles Morgan* (London: Myers, 1933).

¹⁴ Jacob Schwartz, with foreword and notes by A. E. Coppard, *A Bibliography of A. E. Coppard - The Writings of Alfred Edgar Coppard*, (London: Ulysses Bookshop, 1931).

¹⁵ George Brandon Saul, *A.E. Coppard: His Life and Poetry* (University of Pennsylvania: Ph.D. dissertation, 1932).

¹⁶ A. Jehin, *Remarks on the Style of A.E. Coppard*. (Buenos Aires: Talleres gráficos Contreras, 1944).

¹⁷ H.E. Bates, *The modern short story: a critical survey* (London: Nelson, 1941).

1945 – The Present: Academic Studies

A PhD study of the short stories by Russell Charles MacDonald was written in 1961 which is only available on microfiche at the University of Pennsylvania titled *A.E. Coppard: A critical study of his short stories*.¹⁸

T.O. Beachcroft dedicates 3 pages in his chapter *The Twenties and Thirties* from his study *The Modest Art* of 1968¹⁹ to A.E. Coppard. He focusses on Coppard's age of 43 when first published which meant he from an older generation than D.H. Lawrence and H.E. Bates which is reflected in the Victorian richness of language which sometimes peppered his writing. His link to Hardy and Dickens thus becomes stronger as was his love of the Russian writers especially Chekov who is mentioned frequently in letters throughout his life. Beachcroft regards Coppard as having two distinct sides. The fantastic and uncanny and the earthy realist. It is this that Frank O'Connor praised saying that Coppard knew Maupassant and Chekov intimately.²⁰ Beachcroft also states that Coppard was productive but his best work is far superior to his lesser stories and again locates his best work early in his writing career. In 1973 a PhD dissertation was written, *Flynn: A study of A.E. Coppard and his short fiction*. Its author Frank Edmund Smith states that the document is only available on microfiche at Loyola University Chicago. The author himself appears to have lost track of a copy and was unable to provide me with more details²¹. He did however in an email remember interviewing Winifred Coppard before she died although he regretted not digging deeper into A.E. Coppard's past (Appendix 1).

In 1974 Doris Lessing provided a 5 page introduction to the new edition of *Dusky Ruth and other stories*. In it she describes Coppard as 'an exquisite craftsman' and links his work to Thomas Hardy and that when visiting Russia with him he was incapable of playing the role of 'writer' preferring to avoid big speeches, conferences and formal occasions. He was derisive of the rich and famous and his favourite book was 'Tristram Shandy'. Lessing then provides a brief summary biography where she uses Coppard's own autobiography to focus on his 'radical' father and his self-taught education.²²

¹⁸ Russell C. MacDonald, *A.E. Coppard: A Critical Study of His Short Stories*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Phd Dissertation, 1961).

¹⁹ T.O. Beachcroft, *The modest art: a survey of the short story in English*, (London: Oxford U.P., 1968).

²⁰ T.O. Beachcroft, *The modest art*, p.188-191.

²¹ Frank Edmund Smith, *Flynn: A study of A.E. Coppard and his short fiction*, (Chicago: Loyola University, 1973)

²² A.E. Coppard, *Dusky Ruth and other stories*. p.7-11.

Contemporary Views:

Coppard features in various more recent academic anthologies and studies of the short story such as Maunder 2007 and Malcolm & Malcolm 2012(see Bibliography) . However he does not feature at all in Adrian Hunter's 2007 *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English* perhaps showing how neglected and fragile is his reputation. Also in recent years the academic and author Mike Smith has published several online critical pieces on Coppard via his own blog and on the Thresholds Short Story Forum. He particularly focuses on Coppard's methods as in a detailed critique of the *Weep Not My Wanton* story. Charles C. may has similarly drawn parallels with Andre Dubus III on his blog *On The Short Story*. (see Bibliography for references).

LITERARY INFLUENCE

This particular assignment is based on Dorothea Brande and asks the student to comment specifically on influence on own writing. Because of the particular nature of the writer I have chosen (Short Story writer rather than poet) this is extremely hard to do. Firstly I have written poetry not short stories for 30 years and as stated earlier Coppard represents to me a wider rural/regionalist/political alternative take on English modernism. Secondly as I came on to the course to specifically begin an engagement with fiction not just poetry it means I have very little fiction to compare and contrast. The one piece of fiction critiqued in class is not directly relevant to this essay. The notes below show how Coppard may indeed inform and influence me in time. I have therefore drawn out those features that seem most relevant to my future writing here.

THE POETRY

A.E.Coppard published three volumes of poetry in his lifetime and it seems to cease with the Jonathan Cape *Collected Poems* edition of 1928. After his move from Long Wittenham to Walberswick he does not appear to write any more poetry so this could be seen as a summative publication. It contains 65 poems and a tongue in cheek and typically vibrant introduction by the author. Coppard was not as good a poet as he was a short story writer. This has been mentioned by many commentators. The poems can be slight and are suffused with a Victorian sentimentality which mostly absent from the stories. The language can at times be cloying with an over-use of poetic language' such as 'ambrosial', 'mirrored' eyes etc. It is an Edwardian or Victorian language not modernism which filters through. It is not

the language of the poetry that I find interesting but the content. A good many of the poems seem to come from his period alone in the Shepherd's Pit hut in the woods. *The Invisible Rain* and *Quiet* both talk of being alone with nature. The 'over-writing' distracts from the almost pantheistic nature of the writing. There are many references to light and weather throughout the book but the sparkling detail that illuminates the stories is smothered in Victorian syrup. This is the opening of *Invisible Rain* (p.73).

Alone with thoughts that chill me
 I sit reading,
 I sit with an open book at my open door:
 I see the mist arise,
 And coil like a subtle wrestler round the hill.
 While an invisible rain
 Falls like air upon fruit and leaf.

By the end of the poem a distant love is merging in 'glittering tears' and Walter Pater is back but the initial imagery is concrete and affecting. The mawkish sentimentality and self-obsession is held at bay in other places where he draws on folk song and imitates the form. *Crazy Girl's Song* suggests an over reliance on W.B. Yeats whom he met in Oxford but here the writing is crisper and more joyous. *The Troubadour* and *Betty Perrin* also have a freshness absent from the 'darker' and introverted lyrics. At times there is a debt to Chaucer repaid with tales of Millers and Innkeepers. However in *Yokohama Garland* (used as the title of Coppard's single USA poetry publication) he almost welds the two impulses together. A tactile image arrests the ballad-like jauntiness.

I had a rose, a heavy crimson thing
 I got from the farrier's mate for a screw of tobacco:
 I crushed the clumsy flower in a hole in a wall
 And left it there.

It almost as if the young Victorian writer had crashed into the wall of WW1 and emerged the other side as a rural modernist which his writing of short stories is far closer to. His 'clumsy flowers' could be his poems. It was his stories that really bloomed. The poetry as it stands has had little or no influence on my writing. The subject matter and the manner in which they arrived at has as mentioned it more symbolic than direct. The folk song influence has carried over but more through my own long-standing interest in oral literature and folk literature.

THE SHORT STORIES

These short stories are as fine as any we have', 'he was an exquisite craftsman

Doris Lessing 1974 introduction to *Ducky Ruth* and other stories.

Mr Coppard has long cherished the theory that short story and film are expressions of the same art, the art of telling a story by a series of subtly implied gestures, swift shots, moments of suggestion, an art in which elaboration and above all exploration are superfluous and tedious.

H.E.Bates from the *Modern Short Story* 1941.

In terms of influence I here am focussing on traits and characteristics which I hope will influence my short fiction attempts. Having read a wide selection of his short stories the craftsmanship does indeed come over. In some cases a Coppard story can be less than 2000 words which barely a short story more flash fiction but they are elegantly written. *Weep not my wanton* from his first published collection *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me* is a gritty, realistic portrayal of Hardy-like working class characters trudging home to a brutally realistic backdrop of boar-gelding. The metaphorical aspect of the landscape and animals serve as a counterpoint to the harsh reality of the miserable child being assaulted by his drunken father and the importance of the 'sixpence' perhaps reflects on Coppard's own brutal upbringing. There is a Dickensian sharpness to the characterisation and dialogue. The folk literature influences meld with the dialogue seamlessly as in the Gipsy's words,

'Selp me, father, that's a good un, wallop his trousers!'²³

This action is caught 'on camera' for a few minutes against a down-land scene at dusk and even the name of the town 'Arwell' is actually an abbreviation of Harwell which about five miles from Coppard's base at Long Wittenham. This is almost reportage and links to Mike Smith's comments on Coppard's use of notebooks to write down scenes as he saw them. Smith also reflects on the fact that almost all Coppard's tales conform to a traditional 'narrator present' point of view. Coppard here aligns himself with the oral story-telling that he revered addressing the audience directly. It is a trait he flagged up as absolutely deliberate in his foreword to the *Collected Poems* which not only a statement of his working methods but a plea for a different kind of fiction based on a rejection of 'the novel' and all it stood for.

²³ A.E.Coppard, *Weep not my wanton* in 'Dusky Ruth and other stories'.

This preface is attached as an appendix (Appendix2) in its entirety as it a key statement by Coppard about his art. He rejects the notion that the short story is but a 'remnant' or 'rag' cut from the same cloth as the novel. He aligns the contemporary short story with the folk-tale and oral storytelling. He states that

The folk tale ministered to an apparently inborn and universal desire to hear tales, and it is my feeling that the closer the modern short story conforms to that ancient tradition of being spoken to you, rather than being read at you, the more acceptable it becomes.²⁴

This foreword I sent to Jonathan Taylor editor of the *Overheard* anthology²⁵ as it so close to sentiments expressed at that book's launch. It is a sentiment that I already, through years of folk song writing, can adhere to as a first principle in my own short story writing.

Secondly in the foreword Coppard makes a strong comment on the use of point of view stating that writers should use only one character's point of view and links this to Henry James's (a key influence) tale *The Figure in the Carpet*. This foreword is as close to a manifesto as Coppard ever wrote and it one that I could follow. He then ends with as radical a statement as possible about following leaders or convention. It reads like a Rural Bob Dylan.

'Of course one does not adhere to literary principles any more than one does to political or moral ones'.²⁶

Which is clearly a perfect sentiment to end this particular essay on literary influence on.

My personal tale is told in 'Searching for A.E.Coppard' available online at <http://www.shaubelcher.com/coppard> and includes archival and contemporary images.

(Note on length: 3148 without footnotes 3620 with. After the supreme effort to place footnotes in text I decided to leave in as is! I could not find a reference to if included in word total.)

²⁴ A.E.Coppard, *The Collected Tales*, (New York: Knopf: 1951) p.vii-viii.

²⁵ Andrew Taylor (ed.), *Overheard: stories to read aloud*, (Cromer: Salt Publishing, 2012)

²⁶ A.E.Coppard, *Foreword to The Collected Tales*, p.viii.

Appendix 1.

Email correspondence between Frank Edmund Smith and the author. 2001.

Date: Sun, 14 Jan 2001 21:57:53 EST

Shaun:

Very interesting. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on Coppard about 30 years ago. That's why I thought of naming the fiction contest for him, though I don't mention it in the website. My purpose wasn't self promotion, so almost no one would make the connection. I've also written most of the literary encyclopedia articles about Coppard. I never had much interest in his poetry. Sorry about that, but his poetry never got much more than a passing contemporary interest. But, I was very interested in his fiction and in his life, though I was not a very good investigative reporter, so did not have the aggressiveness to learn all I might have about him. I was trained in research that was very distant and impersonal--and my real love has always been writing. I did interview his second wife Winifred and kept up a correspondence with her for a few years.

Also, I've heard about the womanizing and read two novels now (one just a few months ago) by a woman who had a fairly intense affair with him when he lived in the hut. Her husband was his first book publisher. Her "novels" are thinly disguised sexual history with lots of anger directed at Coppard.

His "gypsy" look was often remarked on--the large nose, high cheek bones, dark skin, lank frame. My own grandfather looked much the same way, and in our family the story is that he was half American Indian. But, when I first saw Coppard's photo, I thought that my grandfather, Stickney, might have come from the same English strain as Coppard, though I don't know.

I believe that Coppard's first wife, Lilly Anne, lived past his marriage to Winnifred because she published a novel dedicated to him in the early 30s. Unfortunately, when I had the opportunity to ask these questions, I was really very shy and decorous, so did not.

If you learn more, let me know.

Frank Smith

Appendix 2. A.E.Coppard foreword to *Collected Tales* (Knopf 1951)

FOREWORD

IN preparing this American omnibus collection of my tales I debated whether to risk saying one or two things about them—and myself. For there are dangers either way. Twenty years ago my *Collected Poems* were published by Mr. Knopf and in the introduction I committed the indiscretion of stating that I had nothing much to say about my poems except that I liked them myself. This unbearable effrontery annoyed some reviewers; you might truly have thought I had tried to sell the American public a lot of junk, which I now immodestly declare was then, and still is, very far from being my opinion.

So now about these tales: I refrain from owning that I like them myself merely as a precautionary measure, justifiable on the grounds of previous experience and present expedience, and not as an indication of my regard for them one way or the other. My blatant humility is urging me not to leave it at that, but there are just two things I really must say about short stories in general and their principles of manufacture. First, I want to crush the assumption that the short story and the novel are manifestations of one principle of fiction, differentiated merely by size, that the novel is inherently and naturally the substantial and therefore the important piece of work, the bale of tweed—you may suppose—out of which your golfer gets his plus-four suit, the short story being merely a remnant, the rag or two left over to make the caddie a cap. In fact the relationship of the short story to the novel amounts to nothing at all. The novel is a distinct form of art having a pedigree and practice of hardly more than a couple of hundred years; the short story, so far from being its offspring, is an ancient art originating in the folk tale, which was a thing of joy even before writing, not to mention printing, was invented. Put the beginning of English printing in the last quarter of the fifteenth century and you light on a date when the folk tale lost its oral or spoken form and issued as a printed short story. Moreover, it was only through that

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same device of printing that the novel became even a possibility; it did not materialize until the eighteenth century, its forerunners being *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Gulliver's Travels*.

The folk tale ministered to an apparently inborn and universal desire to hear tales, and it is my feeling that the closer the modern short story conforms to that ancient tradition of being spoken to you, rather than being read at you, the more acceptable it becomes. One of the earliest delights of childhood is to be told a tale, and the queer pleasure does not lessen or leave us until we ourselves are left in the grave. Cut off a person from all contact with tales and he will assuredly begin to invent some—probably about himself. I don't know why this is, or what is the curious compulsion that urges some to take to the job of telling the tale, that unconscionable lying which is styled the Art of Fiction, but for good or ill I seem to have been that sort of liar. It has been a pleasant business for me, and I hope it will not be too bad for those about to receive these fabrications.

The second principle I would like to urge is that unity, verisimilitude, and completeness of contour are best obtained by plotting your story through the mind or consciousness of only one of your characters, a process that I used to think might be the secret hinted at in Henry James's tale "The Figure in the Carpet."

Of course one does not adhere to literary principles any more than one does to political or moral ones—we accept them for guidance, not for use in dictatorship. As long as mine served and were not too difficult to embody, I was virtuous; whenever they became irksome or incurred some loss of interest, I took the primrose path and hoped for the best.

A. E. COPPARD.

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