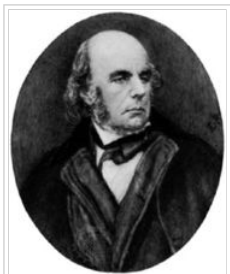


Edward FitzGerald (poet)

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*For other uses see
Edward
Fitzgerald
(disambiguation)*

Edward Marlborough FitzGerald (31 March 1809 – 14 June 1883) was an English writer, best known as the poet of the first and most famous English translation of The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám.



Edward FitzGerald, 1873

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His Life

He was born **Edward Marlborough Purcell**, at Bredfield House in Suffolk. His father, John Purcell, assumed in 1818 the name and arms of his wife's family, the FitzGerald.

This name change occurred shortly after FitzGerald's mother inherited her second fortune. She had previously inherited over a half-million pounds from an aunt, but in 1818 her father died and left her considerably more than that. The FitzGerald were one of the wealthiest families in England, and they inbred as well: FitzGerald's father boasted of being descended from a FitzGerald, and he married his first cousin. Edward FitzGerald later commented that all of his relatives were mad, and further commented that he was insane as well, but at least aware of the fact.

In 1816 the family moved to France, and lived at St Germain and at Paris, but in 1818, after the death of his mother's father, the family had to return to England. In 1821, Edward was sent to school at Bury St Edmunds. In 1826 he went to Trinity College, Cambridge. He became acquainted with William Makepeace Thackeray and William Hepworth Thompson. He had many friends who were members of the Cambridge Apostles, such as Alfred Tennyson, but FitzGerald himself was never invited to join the famous clique. In 1830 FitzGerald left for Paris, but in 1831 was living in a farm-house on the battlefield of Naseby.

Needing no employment, FitzGerald lived quietly, moving to his native county of Suffolk, and never again leaving it for more than a week or two. Until 1835 the FitzGeralds lived at Wherstead; from that year until 1853 the poet resided at Boulge, near Woodbridge; until 1860 at Farlingay Hall; until 1873 in the town of Woodbridge; and then until his death at his own house close by, called Little Grange. During most of this time FitzGerald was preoccupied with flowers, music and literature. He allowed friends like Tennyson and Thackeray to surpass him, and for a long time showed no

intention of emulating their literary success. In 1851 he published his first book, *Euphranor*, a Platonic dialogue, born of memories of the old happy life at Cambridge. In 1852 he published *Polonius*, a collection of "saws and modern instances", some of them his own, the rest borrowed from the less familiar English classics. FitzGerald began the study of Spanish poetry in 1850 at Elmsett and that of Persian at the University of Oxford with Professor Edward Byles Cowell in 1853. In middle life, he married Lucy, the daughter of Bernard Barton, the Quaker poet. The marriage was a disaster, and did not survive even a year.

Early Literary Work

In 1853, he issued *Six Dramas of Calderon*, freely translated. He now turned to Oriental studies, and in 1856 he anonymously published a version of the *Sálamán* and *Absál* of Jámi in Miltonic verse. In March 1857 Cowell discovered a set of Persian quatrains by Omar Khayyám in the Asiatic Society library, Calcutta, and sent them to FitzGerald. At this time the name with which he has been so closely identified first occurs in FitzGerald's correspondence--"Hafiz and Omar Khayyám ring

like true metal." On January 15, 1859 a little anonymous pamphlet was published as *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. In the world at large, and in the circle of FitzGerald's particular friends, the poem seems at first to have attracted no attention. The publisher allowed it to gravitate to the fourpenny or even (as he afterwards boasted) to the penny box on the bookstalls.

But in 1860 Rossetti discovered it, and Swinburne and Lord Houghton quickly followed. The *Rubaiyat* became slowly famous, but it was not until 1868 that FitzGerald was encouraged to print a second and greatly revised edition. Meanwhile he had produced in 1865 a version of the *Agamemnon*, and two more plays from Calderón. In 1880–1881 he issued privately translations of the two Oedipus tragedies; his last publication was *Readings* in Crabbe, 1882. He left in manuscript a version of Attar's *Mantic-Uttair* under the title of *Bird Parliament*. This last translation FitzGerald called "a Bird's-Eye view of the Bird Parliament," whittling the Persian original (some 4500 lines) down to a much more manageable 1500 lines in English; at least one scholar views this translation as a masterpiece which is virtually unknown (A.D.P. Briggs, in his edition of the *Rubaiyat* and the *Bird Parliament*, Everyman's Poetry, 1998). As

appreciation for FitzGerald's poetic genius grows, it is possible that his reputation may be greatly enhanced.

From 1861 onwards FitzGerald's greatest interest had been in the sea. In June 1863 he bought a yacht, "The Scandal," and in 1867 he became part-owner of a herring-lugger, the "Meum and Tuum." For some years, till 1871, he spent the summer months "knocking about somewhere outside of Lowestoft." In this way, and among his books and flowers, FitzGerald gradually became an old man. He died painlessly in his sleep. He was "an idle fellow, but one whose friendships were more like loves." In 1885 his fame was increased by the fact that Tennyson dedicated his *Tiresias* to FitzGerald's memory, in some touching reminiscent verses to "Old Fitz." This was but the signal for that universal appreciation of Omar Khayyám in his English version.

Eccentricities and Personal Life

Fitzgerald had his eccentricities. Among them, we might count the following: he was a vegetarian who loathed vegetables. Having vowed to give up meat, and disdaining green vegetables, he lived on

a diet of bread, butter, fruit and tea. He rarely drank alcohol, which one would never guess from his translations of Khayyam. But he did not make a fetish of these dietary scruples: if he was dining in society, and all others were eating meat, he would eat meat. All in all, he seems to have been almost completely insensitive to the taste of food.

Of FitzGerald as a man practically nothing was known until, in 1889, Mr W. Aldis Wright, his close friend and literary executor, published his *Letters and Literary Remains* in three volumes. This was followed in 1895 by the *Letters to Fanny Kemble*. These letters constitute a fresh bid for immortality, since they revealed that FitzGerald was a witty, picturesque and sympathetic letterwriter. One of the most unobtrusive authors who ever lived, FitzGerald has, nevertheless, by the force of his extraordinary individuality, gradually influenced the whole face of English *belles-lettres*, in particular as it was manifested between 1890 and 1900.

FitzGerald's emotional life was extremely complex. He lived for his friends, almost all of whom were men, but he also had a series of extremely intimate friends (also male). The first was William Browne, who was sixteen when he

met Fitzgerald. They were very close friends until Browne's marriage. Browne's early death was a major catastrophe for FitzGerald. Later, FitzGerald became just as infatuated with a fisherman named Joseph Fletcher. But there was a very visible innocence in all of this: whenever he made such a friend, he filled all of his letters with praise of the new young man, and one really must wonder (in this pre-Freudian era) if Fitzgerald really understood what was going on with his emotions. That is, modern biographers might simply state that Fitzgerald was "gay," but it seems quite likely that we will never know if any of this overwhelming love was ever physically expressed. On the whole, Robert Bernard Martin suspects that FitzGerald remained in the dark (or refused to think about these matters) at least until he became an extremely eccentric older man, and the local villagers were full of gossip about his marriage, which lasted less than a year, and his intimate friendship with...a fisherman! His choice of an epitaph (from Psalms) echoes the thoughts of the Rubaiyat: "It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves."

As he grew older, he grew more and more disenchanted with Christianity, and finally gave up attending church entirely. This drew the attention

of the local pastor, who decided to pay a visit to this self-absenting member of his flock. The conversation was very short. FitzGerald told the pastor that his decision to absent himself from church services was the fruit of long and hard meditation. When the pastor protested, FitzGerald showed him to the door, and explained that no further visits would be necessary.

The *Works of Edward FitzGerald* appeared in 1887. See also a chronological list of FitzGerald's works (Caxton Club, Chicago, 1899); notes for a bibliography by Col. WF Prideaux, in *Notes and Queries* (9th series, vol. vL), published separately in 1901; *Letters and Literary Remains* (ed. W Aldis Wright, 1902-1903); and the *Life of Edward FitzGerald*, by Thomas Wright (1904), which contains a bibliography (vol. ii. pp. 241-243) and a list of sources (vol. i. pp. xvi.-xvii.). The volume on FitzGerald in the "English Men of Letters" series is by AC Benson. The FitzGerald centenary was celebrated in March 1909. See the *Centenary Celebrations Souvenir* (Ipswich, 1909) and *The Times* for March 25, 1909 Today the major source is Robert Bernard Martin's biography, *With Friends Possessed: A Life of Edward Fitzgerald*.

The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

FitzGerald's translation of the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám is notable for the frequency and ubiquity of quotations from it and allusions to it. Its popularity, still high, is in decline; but for about a century following its publication, it formed part of the mental furniture of most English-speaking readers.

Of the 107 stanzas in the poem (fifth edition), the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations (2nd edition) quotes no less than 43 *entire stanzas in full*, in addition to many individual lines and couplets.

The most familiar stanza is surely:

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

However, the work is now held to be more reflective of Fitzgerald than of Khayyam, whose collected works have been corrupted by forgeries

added over the centuries. It is necessary to seek out one of the scholarly editions of Khayyam; see Ali Dashti's *In Search of Omar Khayyam* for a good discussion of the problem. No women feature in Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyat* and "it is most probable that FitzGerald envisaged "the thou beside me" to accompany him in the wilderness as being a young male."^[1]

Lines and phrases from the poem have been used as the titles of many literary works (Nevil Shute's *The Chequer Board*; James Michener's *The Fires of Spring*; Agatha Christie's *The Moving Finger*; Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness*—slightly misquoted). Allusions to it abound in the short stories of O. Henry. Saki's nom-de-plume is a reference to it. In 1925, when Billy Rose and Al Dubin wrote the popular song *A Cup of Coffee, A Sandwich, and You*, they surely expected listeners to catch the reference to the famous quatrain quoted above.

FitzGerald published five editions of his translation of the *Rubáiyát*, of which three (the first, second, and fifth) are significantly different. (The second and third are almost identical, as are the fourth and fifth). The first and fifth editions are almost equally popular and equally often anthologized.

The stanza above, from the fifth edition, is more familiar than the corresponding stanza in the first edition ("Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the bough/A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse—and Thou"). On the other hand, the lines "'Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days/Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays," from the first edition, are more familiar than their equivalent from the fifth: "But helpless Pieces of the Game He plays/Upon this Chequer-board of Nights and Days").

Spelling note: In this article, FitzGerald's name is spelled with an internal capital G, as it is in his own publications, in anthologies such as the Quiller-Couch *Oxford Book of English Verse*, and in most reference books up through about the 1960s. Both spellings—FitzGerald and Fitzgerald—are currently seen.

Quotations

"If you can prove to me that one miracle took place, I will believe he is a just God who damned us all because a woman ate an apple."

"Science unrolls a greater epic than the Iliad. The

present day teems with new discoveries in Fact, which are greater, as regards the soul and prospect of men, than all the disquisitions and quiddities of the Schoolmen. A few fossil bones in clay and limestone have opened a greater vista back into time than the Indian imagination ventured upon for its gods. This vision of Time must not only wither the poet's hope of immortality, it is in itself more wonderful than all the conceptions of Dante and Milton."

"I am all for the short and merry life." Epitaph

"Leave well - even 'pretty well' - alone: that is what I learn as I get old."

Notes

1. ^ *The Times Literary Supplement*; Times Online, "Omar Khayyam's Bible for drunkards" by Robert Irwin [1]

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- **Great Minds** "The Rubáiyát of Edward FitzOmar", Gary Sloan, Free Inquiry, Winter 2002/2003 - Volume 23, No. 1
- Ali Dashti, **In Search of Omar Khayyam**

- H. Montgomery Hyde, **The Love That Dared Not Speak Its Name**, Little, Brown, 1970.
- James Blyth **Edward Fitzgerald and Posh**, London, 1908.
- Robert Bernard Martin, **With Friends Possessed**, Atheneum, 1985.

External links

- Works by Edward FitzGerald at Project Gutenberg
- Works by/about Edward FitzGerald at Internet Archive. Scanned, illustrated original editions.
- Edward FitzGerald's Grave
- Bird Parliament by Edward FitzGerald

See also

- Jorge Borges, "The Enigma of Edward FitzGerald," *Selected Non-Fictions*, Penguin, 1999, ISBN 0140290117

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