

The world's literary societies: Torchbearers for famous (and not so famous) authors



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Bibliophiles seeking good news in an electronic world should note that literary societies are flourishing as never before. Carrying torches for authors who are mostly dead, the thousands of members of the hundreds of literary societies around the world express their devotion not only as readers, but as actors, archivists, caretakers, conference organizers, congregation members, curators, diners, educators, mourners, plaque installers, publishers, tourists and many more roles besides. They are the unpaid promotion departments of the publishing houses under whose imprints their heroes appear; avid users of libraries which carry collected works; and good sources of income, seldom acknowledged, to antiquarian booksellers.

At the end of 1996, there were 258 societies in the UK and North America alone – 126 in the UK, 127 in the US and five in Canada. They honour 150 men and thirty-six women authors. Forty-one authors have two or more societies devoted to them. There are seven Shakespeare and five Mark Twain societies. Lewis Carroll, G K Chesterton and James Joyce are each honoured by four societies. The Brownings and Keats/Shelley are jointly honoured by three societies, as are Christopher Marlowe, Edgar Allen Poe and Swedenborg. The three Brontë sisters and three Powys brothers share societies.

Characters may be celebrated as well as authors. Diverse examples are Rupert Bear and Sherlock Holmes. "The Followers of Rupert" are devoted to "study, discussion and appreciation of Rupert Bear studies; past, present and future" (no mention of Mary Tourtel, the artist who drew the famous bear), while "The Baker Street Irregulars" aim "to keep green the memory of the master".

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How do societies start? Sometimes on impulse. The Angela Thirkell Society was formed

in 1977, sixteen years after the author's death, following controversy over one short paragraph in the 182-page biography of Thirkell by Margot Strickland. It was alleged that she had ordered her second husband to administer beatings to her sons. The reviews of the book seized on these lines to denigrate the novelist: "Beast in Tweeds", "Mama was an ogre" and "Deadly Angela" were some of the headlines in the heavy Sundays. Lance Thirkell, the author's youngest son, wrote to the press to say that he had never been beaten. He received many letters of support from admirers of Angela Thirkell's genteel, satirical novels of the 1930s to '50s, set in Barsetshire, the county invented by Anthony Trollope for his novels. One Thirkell fan, Diana McFarlan of Dublin, wrote to several papers to suggest the formation of "a fellowship or society based in London" for "many all over the world who have enjoyed and appreciated the Barsetshire novels of the late Mrs Angela Thirkell".

So was born the Thirkell Society, under the presidency of Lance Thirkell, "to make the works of Angela Thirkell available to new generations". Most of the books had fallen out of print. The Society now has a membership of over 500 – predominantly women, with branches in England, Ireland, Australia (where Thirkell spent nine years of an unhappy second marriage) and, most rapidly growing, in North America, where her works are seen as manuals of social behaviour as well as enjoyable light reading. The North American branch, formed in Indianapolis in 1987, is planning a two-week tour of England to visit Thirkell's London homes and the sites of scenes of her novels, her grave near Brighton, the collection of her papers in Leeds University Library and church windows designed by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, who was her grandfather.

Activities of literary societies are multifarious. The Trollope Society dines annually at Lincoln's Inn (formerly at the Reform Club), with celebrated speakers, and holds an annual party which in 1996 was in the grounds of Westminster Abbey. The T E Lawrence Society leads its members in the footsteps of their hero on fifteen-day guided tours to Jordan and Syria. The Oscar Wilde Society offers a creative artwork award to inmates of the former Reading jail, which is now a remand centre.

Anniversaries are punctiliously celebrated. Thomas Hardy's 150th date of birth was

marked by a commemoration service at Westminster Abbey, by lectures, by readings, by a commissioned jazz suite, by post office stamps and by a flower festival. For Agatha Christie's centenary the Orient Express pulled into Torquay, her birthplace, where an appropriate exhibition and the world Cluedo Championships were held. The centenary of publication of Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* was marked by a national poetry competition on the theme "Remembered Places".

Societies are fond of plaques, generally installed to mark the houses in which their heroes and heroines lived. The John Clare Society is seeking to raise £10,000 to cast in bronze a full-sized sculpture of the poet. The Trollope Society successfully campaigned (with the help of the then Prime Minister John Major) to have Trollope admitted to Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey.

Not all societies' names make clear whom they are celebrating. The Gar Hold/Darriel Council "promotes appreciation of the works of science fiction and mystery writers Ann McCaffrey and Marion Zimmer Bradley". The "ZZ9 Plural Z Alpha" aims "to further the interest of science fiction; to provide information on Douglas Adam's work; to offer social activities". Praed Street Irregulars exists for "individuals interested in the Solar Pons stories of Wisconsin author August Derleth, and fans of Sherlock Holmes and detective and mystery fiction". The Wolfe Pack exists for admirers of Rex Stout.

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What motivates people to join literary societies? Locality is one factor. Jane and Stewart Self, while living in Rochester and liking the novels of Dickens, felt they could not but join the Dickens Fellowship. They attended monthly meetings, listened to formal talks, enjoyed annual parties and participated in costumed carol singing and performance of sketches at appropriate venues.

Sometimes being a literary society office-bearer can lead to unexpected rewards. When David Selznick and George Cukor came from Hollywood in 1932 to visit Dickens sites in England, preparatory to filming MGM's *David Copperfield*, they engaged the President of the Dickens Society to turn their prepared adaptation into an acceptable screenplay. His name was Hugh Walpole.

Kenneth Oultram, a Cheshire journalist, came to feel ashamed of knowing so little of the county's most famous author and set up the Daresbury Lewis Carroll Society in 1970. He has remained its secretary ever since, his duties including the selection of a succession of eighteen little girls to make public appearances as Alice. Discovering Carroll's correspondence with Randolph Caldecott, also of Chester, Oultram set up the Randolph Caldecott Society in 1983 and as its secretary has visited Caldecott's grave in Florida and addressed the US Caldecott Society. In addition to editing the newsletters of the Carroll and Caldecott Societies, Oultram is on the committee of the Gaskell Society and edits the newsletter of the Alliance of Literary Societies.

Equally dedicated, if more concentrated, are Paddy Hancock of Wirral, who has sorted the archives of the Dickens Fellowship, helped with costumes for Victorian soirées and charity shows, and travelled to annual conferences and birthday dinners; and John Bolitho of Hatfield, who discovered Trollope when the Palliser series was televised and resolved, after the first instalment, to "watch no more but read the books". He was introduced to the Trollope Society by John Antcliffe of Rothschilds, while they were waiting for an Electricity Privatization meeting to start. "I joined when it started publishing the books and have remained a member ever since."

The most common motivation is the simple desire to share enthusiasms and meet the like-minded. Christine Shuttleworth and Peggy Hawthorne both loved Barbara Pym's novels and grieved at her death in 1980. Since reading about the Pym Society, founded in 1993, they have attended annual weekend conferences at Pym's college, St Hilda's in Oxford. Spin-offs can also happen. Two disciples of Charlotte Yonge met at a Pym conference and went off to found the Charlotte Yonge Fellowship.

Cheshire also has a pocket of Dickens aficionados. Paddy Hancock thought as a child that Sam Weller must be a friend of her father's. "The family Dickens (all his works, in three volumes bought by my grandfather in New York in 1880) travelled with me through the African bush for years. When I came to the UK in 1970 I wrote to Dickens House and was referred to the Liverpool

branch of the Dickens Fellowship – the oldest, founded in 1903. Since then I have been involved with it as Council Member, Hon Secretary and President. We have organized special events marking Dickens' connection with Merseyside, public entertainments, and raised sums for the Fellowship's charitable 'Oliver Fund'."

Robert Barnard, a former Professor of English at Tromsø University, is Chairman of the Brontë Society. His more than thirty crime novels include *A Hovering of Vultures* (Corgi/Transworld, 1993), which revolves round the murder of the Chairman of a literary society at its inaugural conference, the plot hinging on copyright and the forgery of literary relics. At "literary do's like this," one of Barnard's characters relates, "you get all ages and types, but what is common to most of them is a sort of mild mania.... They've got themselves fixated on this one author, often for some odd, personal reason. Some of them hardly read any other author, just madly re-read the one." Looking round the hall as the conference gathers, the Chairman reflects that the audience is "gratifyingly young" By which he "meant that there were more under sixties than are generally found in such societies".

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Many societies produce their own journals, often with delightfully apposite names, especially in the United States. *Evermore* is devoted to the works of Edgar Allan Poe; *Fence Painter* is about Mark Twain; *Knothole* about Christopher Morley. Agatha Christie is celebrated in *Laurel Lines*, Hegel in *The Owl of Minerva*, P G Wodehouse in the *The Perennial Plum* and the Brownings in *Through Casa Guidi Windows*.

Several societies provide indexes to their authors' works, or at least character guides. The Jane Austen Society has produced a study pack for GCSE students, and followers of Thomas Hardy can enjoy a CD of settings of his poems. The Trollope Society has become a major publisher, bringing out the first complete uniform edition of all his forty-seven novels and his *Autobiography*. This will be followed, the Society hopes, by his travel volumes, his *Commentaries on Caesar* and his lives of Palmerston and Cicero. The Society also offers sets of ten of the books and a set of CDs.

Societies can also stimulate imitative authorship on the part of their members. The Angela Thirkell Society has published a volume of short stories "in the manner of Angela Thirkell". The Barbara Pym Society offers a cookery book devised from dishes in her novels, *A la Pym*. And for £30 one can buy a book by a member of the Wodehouse Society on PGW's tax battles.

Societies also unite into super-societies. The UK's Alliance of Literary Societies (ALS) began in 1973 when Mrs Kathleen Adams, secretary of the George Eliot Fellowship, which had successfully campaigned to protect George Eliot's childhood home against the proposal to erect a petrol station next to it, wrote to *The Times* about a similarly endangered Dickens building. She suggested that literary societies should band together and raise their corporate voice in such cases. After fifteen years of informal liaison, she again wrote to *The Times*. The outcome was the formal founding of the ALS at a meeting attended by eighty representatives of twenty-seven societies. The Alliance now has seventy-three societies in membership. Its "official fanzine", called *Chapter One*, includes news and advertising. Members can buy pin badges, blazer badges, mugs, ties, umbrellas, key rings, T-shirts with "front illustrations" of Byron, Lewis Carroll, Dylan Thomas, Yeats or others "with full poem on the reverse". Guided tours of George Eliot country, a journal of Victorian culture and out-of-print book searches are among other services offered.

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In addition to the UK and the US, literary societies are found in many other countries. The Dickens Fellowship has two branches in Australia, three in Canada and one each in France, Holland, Italy, Japan, New Zealand and South America, plus an astonishing eighteen branches in the US.

In Germany, there are 118 literary societies grouped in sixteen districts. These are described in the *Literarische Gesellschaften in Deutschland: Ein Handbuch*, compiled by the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Literarischer Gesellschaften and published by Aufbau-Verlag of Berlin. Most of them naturally honour German writers, but there is a Marcel Proust-Gesellschaft in Köln and Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft in Weimar. The Heinrich

Heine Gesellschaft in Düsseldorf maintains the Heine archives, publishes a Heine yearbook, catalogues and monographs, supports research work and holds conferences.

In Australia, according to the *Directory of Australian Associations* (17th edition 1993), there is only one single-author society – the Robert Burns Club of Melbourne – which is affiliated to the "World Body of Burns Clubs", and which "holds a wide variety of social activities throughout the year", presumably reaching their climax each 25th January.

At meetings of Sweden's Sherlock Holmes Society, which claims to be "the most active in Scandinavia", deer-stalkers may be worn. The Swedes also report that one of their interesting projects is "to award pipe symbols to all British-style pubs in Stockholm".

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Information on British literary societies can be found in the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* (A & C Black) and the *Directory of Literary Societies and Author Collections* (Library Association Publishing, 1994). Here one can read not only about the societies, but their aims. The Enid Blyton Society wishes "to encourage serious study of the life and works of Enid Blyton and promote interest in collecting her books, etc". The James Bond Society exists "to promote the reading of Ian Fleming's novels and archive all material appertaining to the James Bond phenomenon".

Gale Research's *Encyclopedia of Associations* (31st edition 1996) lists more than 100 literary societies in Canada and the US in its "Cultural Organizations" section. Again, the American listings include imaginative names. "Partners in crime" (Virginia) and "Postern of murder" (Pennsylvania) are both Agatha Christie appreciation societies. Other notable non-American authors honoured by societies in North America are Dante, Dostoevsky, Pirandello, Bertrand Russell, George Sand, Arthur Schnitzler and Evelyn Waugh. Among counterparts of British societies are the Jane Austen Society of North America in Raleigh, North Carolina; the Browning Institute in New York; the Byron Society in New Jersey; and the D H Lawrence Society of North America in Texas. The United States being

a large country, some authors have multiple representation. There are James Joyce Societies in New York and Oregon, and he is also honoured by the Bloomsday Club of New Brunswick.

Shakespeare is predictably the most celebrated. There is a Shakespeare Association of America in Dallas, Texas; a Shakespeare Data Bank in Evanston, Illinois; the Shakespeare Guild in Washington, DC; the Shakespeare Society of America in California; the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft in Weimar; and the Shakespeare Authorship and Birthplace Trusts in the UK. Shakespeare can also claim to have inspired the Marlowe Lives! Association. The Shakespeare Author Society of Nashua, New Hampshire does not mention Marlowe, but "attempts to verify evidence bearing on the authorship of works attributed to Shakespeare".

Some societies consciously reach beyond the mere worship and promotion of their chosen authors. The International Brecht Society of the University of Georgia "encourages free and open discussion on the relationship of the arts to the contemporary world". Burroughs Bibliophiles (Kentucky) "seeks to correct the misinterpretations given the author's works [the Tarzan books and science fiction] by motion pictures and comic art forms". The James Joyce Society of Southern Colorado "supports writers' rights and intellectual freedom". The Vladimir Nabokov Society of the University of Kansas "encourages fellowship among readers", while the New York Browning Society seeks "to cultivate an interest in the highest forms of literature, music and art; and to work for the intellectual development of its members".

Several of the American societies offer awards or run annual competitions. The Horatio Alger Society bestows two awards, one "to publishers and authors for the best publication in sympathy with Alger's rags to riches theme" and the other "to the outstanding society member". The New York Browning Society gives a prize "for the best poem by a student in a New York high school". The Dickens and T S Eliot Societies give gifts for essays written by graduate students, while the James Joyce Society of Southern Colorado makes an annual freedom of expression award "for individuals with intellectual courage".

The oldest society in the US is the Swedenborg Foundation, founded in 1849. (Its journal is called LOGOS.) The second and third oldest are the New York Browning Society, founded in 1907 and the Louisa May Alcott Memorial Association, which dates from 1911. New societies are constantly being formed. The Marlowe Lives! Association dates from 1993. In the UK, the inaugural meeting of the Philip Larkin Society was held at Hull University at the end of 1995, to the accompaniment of wine and jazz.

The smallest society appears to be the Robinson Jeffers Committee, with a membership of three. (Jeffers was an American poet who died in 1962. His lyrics, according to Webster's *New Biographical Dictionary*, expressed "bitter contempt of humanity and love of the harsh eternal beauties of nature".) The Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association has a membership of fifteen. At the other end of the spectrum, the Jesse Stuart Foundation has 7,000 members. Byron and Jane Austen also do well in the US with memberships of 2,000 and 2,700 respectively. Some foundations are well-financed. The Francis Bacon Foundation in the US has a budget of \$130,000 and a staff of four. The Mark Twain Memorial budget is \$1m. The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, with a staff of nine and a budget of \$788,000, "has a library containing more than 15,000 volumes, 6,000 pamphlets, 160,000 manuscript items, early photographs, architectural drawings, biographical archives and wallpaper study samples".

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The latest manifestation of literary societies can be found on the Internet. The Usenet News Group offers notice boards and forums for discussion and the exchange of information, resulting in disembodied literary societies with globally distributed membership. Authors so far represented in these electronic literary pseudo-societies include Edward Abbey, Jane Austen, William Blake, the Brontë sisters, Chaucer, Conan Doyle, Charles Dickens, Emily Dickinson, T S Eliot, James Joyce, Jack London, Milton, Nabokov, Pinchen, Jean Rice, Anne Rice, Shakespeare, Spencer, Tolkien, Trollope, Twain and Mary Wollstonecraft. □