

## Chapter & Verse

James Knox Whittet

May 2014

Thanks to all of you who wrote to me after last month's newsletter. It was good to hear from you. Do keep in touch by emailing me at: [president@suffolkpoetrysociety.org.uk](mailto:president@suffolkpoetrysociety.org.uk)



**A HIDDEN  
LIFE:  
CHARLOTTE  
MEW  
(1869-1928)**

Charlotte Mew led a life of concealment. She concealed her poverty and that her family were reduced to taking in lodgers to help pay the rent for their house in Bloomsbury. She concealed the fact that two of her two sisters were kept in mental institutions-at considerable expense-and her own crippling fear of insanity. She never talked to outsiders about her difficult, domineering widowed mother. Above all, Charlotte concealed the fact that she was a lesbian in an age when it wasn't just socially unacceptable but barely recognized even by the most knowing members of society. Although, Charlotte dressed in the manner of a male, it was just viewed as one of her many eccentricities.

She was a very small lady and her appearance was invariably described as 'odd'. She was painfully shy and ill at ease in company. The only person she ever really felt close to was her sister, Ann who was a struggling artist. Although Charlotte is now best known as a poet, she began by writing short stories and only later in life did she turn to poetry. Beneath the rather severe

character which she presented to the world, she had a very passionate nature and on three occasions in her life became besotted with another woman. On the third and final time, she, in her early forties, developed a passion for the celebrated novelist, May Sinclair-now largely forgotten. Charlotte and May had become friends but Charlotte wanted to be more than friends and when May sent her a poem she had written in the sensuous manner of the French poet, Verlaine, Charlotte wrongly assumed that this was a declaration of love. On receipt of this poem, Charlotte rushed round to May's house and threw herself at her. May who felt passionate only about her two cats, was rather alarmed at this and ran upstairs in order to escape Charlotte's desperate clutches. Charlotte followed her upstairs and May, who was a somewhat stout lady in her fifties, claimed that she had to leap over her bed in order to prevent Charlotte from getting on top of her.

This third experience of unrequited love seemed to extinguish something in Charlotte and in one of her most touching poems, she conveys this *steady slowing down of the heart*.

As in so many of her poems, it ends in a note of unearthly strangeness where in typical fashion, some lines stretch beyond the bounds of the page. The poem is simply called 'Rooms'.

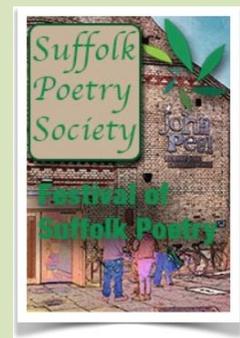
*I remember rooms that have  
had their part  
In the steady slowing down of  
the heart;  
The room in Paris, the room at  
Geneva,  
The little damp room with the  
seaweed smell,  
And that ceaseless maddening  
sound of the tide -  
Rooms where for good or ill,  
things died:  
But there is the room where  
we two lie dead  
Though every morning we  
seem to wake, and might just  
as well seem to sleep again  
As we shall some day in the  
other dustier quieter bed  
Out there - in the sun - in the  
rain.*



**1<sup>st</sup> Festival of Poetry  
Saturday  
31<sup>st</sup> May 2014  
at**

**The John Peel Centre  
Stowmarket  
for full details go to:**

[suffolkpoetrysociety.org.uk/festival](http://suffolkpoetrysociety.org.uk/festival)



*cont'd*

A few years' earlier, another influential friend, Mrs Dawson Scott had invited Charlotte to give a rare reading which left a deep impression on the small audience. Charlotte was described as entering into a trance-like state to read like one 'possessed'. This eventually brought her to the attention of the poet and publisher, Harold Monro who opened his famous poetry bookshop in Bloomsbury in 1913. Monro was an unusual publisher of poetry in that he did not ask the poet to contribute to the cost of printing the book – before the age of arts council grants, this was standard practice. This was just as well as Charlotte could barely have afforded to contribute a penny. *The Farmer's Bride*, containing just seventeen poems, appeared in chapbook format in 1916. Of the thousand copies printed, 850 were remaindered. A few years later, through the influence of another friend, the small collection was published in the USA with the addition of seven poems. These were the only poems Charlotte had published in her lifetime. Although the book sold badly and received few reviews, Charlotte gained a number of influential admirers

including Virginia Woolf, Siegfried Sassoon and Thomas Hardy.

Within the next few years, Charlotte suffered two terrible blows: the death of her mother and, above all, the death of her beloved sister, Ann due to breast cancer. Charlotte was unable to recover from this second loss and she entered a period of black despair. One afternoon she left the room in a sanatorium in which she had been confined and went to a nearby shop where she bought a bottle of the cheapest household disinfectant, Lysol. When she returned to her room, she poured half the bottle into a glass and drank it. The liquid which contained creosote had a violent corrosive effect and she died slowly in agony. She left instructions that her body be buried in the same grave as her sister. Although she was best known in her lifetime for her free formed narrative poems, it's in the containment of a sonnet that she expresses most intimately that longing, even in death, for some place of deep concealment, *some remote and quiet stair*.

*Not for that City*

*Not for that city of the level sun,  
Its golden streets and glittering gates ablaze -  
The shadeless, sleepless city of white days,  
White nights, or days that are as one -  
We weary, when all is said, all thought, all done.  
We strain our eyes beyond the dusk to see  
What, from the threshold of eternity  
We shall step into. No, I think we shun  
The splendour of that everlasting glare,  
The clamour of that never ending song.  
And if for anything we greatly long  
It is for some remote and quiet stair  
Which winds to silence and a space for sleep  
Too sound for waking and for dreams too deep.*

**George Crabbe  
Memorial Poetry  
Competition 2014**

*Sponsored by Fairweather  
Stephenson & Co. Solicitors*

The competition closes on  
May 31<sup>st</sup> 2014

The Adjudicator is  
**Gregory Warren Wilson**

For more details and  
entry form go to:

<http://suffolkpoetrysociety.org.uk/>



28<sup>th</sup> June to 5<sup>th</sup> July

<http://southwoldartsfestival.co.uk/>

**Fakenham Poetry Circle  
Open Poetry Competition  
2014**

**1<sup>st</sup> Prize £140  
2<sup>nd</sup> Prize £90  
3<sup>rd</sup> Prize £50**

Contact Kay for details and  
entry form at:  
[kayhathway@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:kayhathway@yahoo.co.uk)

**Closing date for entries  
14<sup>th</sup> July 2014**