

# May Cannan

Attached is a correspondence between me and the curator at Cotehele about May Cannan, the poet who was engaged to marry Bevil Quiller Couch at the time of his death from Flu in Berlin in 1919.

The tale of Q, Bevil and May is full of sadness and joy, and the little tale which unfolds as the result of an accidental observation whilst Sue and I were on holiday adds a small twist.

Bert Biscoe

Truro

22nd August 2016

Dear Cotehele Curator

I visited the house today - all good! The exhibition about the Great War includes a book of poems open at a page featuring two poets - Rosemary ???? and May Cledderburn Canaan. The poem by Canaan is half-covered by a card.

I have left a comment card but though I would write to explain about May Canaan.

She was the daughter of the Director of the Clarendon Press, Oxford, Arthur Canaan. He was a very close friend of Sir Arthur Quiller Couch, Professor of English Literature and Jesus College, Cambridge, novelist, poet, critic and man of Fowey. Just before the outbreak of war, Canaan's daughter met Bevil Quiller Couch, son of 'Q'. He proposed but was unwilling to marry whilst he remained an officer in the Royal Artillery.

She involved herself in the war effort, and wrote poems recounting her experience. They are increasingly finding prominence in recent times. This is partly due to the efforts of her Great Niece, Charlotte Fyfe, who wrote an exceptional book called 'The Tears of War' (ISBN1-899470-18-2). It recounts, using letters and poems, the relationship between May and Bevil, and the subsequent very touching relationship which grew up between herself and 'Q'.

At the end of the War May was working with Intelligence in Paris and was told one day that Major Couch was downstairs. He proposed and they went quickly to Fowey to meet his parents. It was a happy moment. Bevil was still in the army and found himself posted to Berlin where he contracted flu and died. They never married. May and 'Q' comforted each other until she visited him one day in his rooms at Jesus College to announce that she had received a proposal from a solicitor from Yorkshire who admired her poetry. There is a letter, included in Tears of War, from 'Q' to May encouraging her to break away and to accept the offer of marriage.

She gave him an Andre Breton rose - a climber - which he had planted below his window at Jesus College. By the time of his death it had colonised the entire wall.

May married, only to discover that her husband (Mr Cledderburn) was jealous of her authorial talent. She ceased writing until after his death. Her final book was a short autobiography which covered her childhood and early adulthood up to the moment when Bevil died. She wrote many poems during the war and immediately afterwards to and about Bevil. Hers was a different voice in the canon of Great War poetry - a woman's voice, not necessarily a dissident one, but of one who saw the horrors and tried to set them within the context of 'cause'. She wrote of love for a man who might be killed at any moment, and she wrote of grief and healing - a woman's perspective, not radical but observant, sentient and clearly, powerfully written - her voice is remarkably free - quite modern. The half-obscured poem in the glass case at Cotehele is one of her poems to Bevil, and a fine one too.

The Edgcumbe family would have known 'Q' through their mutual engagement with the relatively new Cornwall County Council. 'Q' was Chairman of the Education Committee for 30 years, and oversaw the introduction of secondary education into Cornwall. In The Cornish Magazine of 1897/8, of which he was the Editor, 'Q' had fostered a correspondence issue by issue, the central theme of

which was to consider economic prospects in the post-industrial, post-collapse of Cornish mining. In his summation of that debate in the final issue he wrote:

*“The suggestion is that Cornwall should turn her natural beauty to account, and, by making it more widely known, at once benefit thousands and dishonestly enrich herself. Well, on this point, jealous as I am for the beauty of our Duchy, and delighted when strangers admire her, I am if possible more jealous for the character of her sons, and more eager that strangers shall respect them. And I do see that a People which lays itself out to exploit the stranger and the tourist runs an appreciable risk of deterioration in manliness and independence. It may seem a brutal thing to say, but as I had rather be poor myself than subservient, so I would liefer see my countrymen poor than subservient.”*

This statement might be seen as a form of mission statement for the Cornish people throughout the 20th!

I'm familiar with this tale because I'm the Chairman of the Sir Arthur Quiller Couch Memorial Fund. It was set up by his friends in 1946, after his death. It provides small grants to writers, researchers and publishers to support literary work. Scrutiny of acknowledgements of a significant number of publications about Cornwall over the past 70-odd years includes mention of the Q Fund. We also try to sustain the profile and reputation of Q. One event which we produced a few years back featured Bevil Luck, son of former NT employee, Liz Luck, who played Bevil Quiller Couch in a short adaptation of Tears of War.

I thought you might like to know all this in the hope that you might just slightly shift that card which is obscuring May's lovely poem and let your visitors read it - the narrative above is to provide some explanation if you cared to offer it. Bevil's death affected 'Q' profoundly. He immersed himself in work for the rest of his life. His daughter, Foy, was, of course, a long-standing resident at Lanhydrock. The story of May is not quite tragic, but it is one of emotional suppression, of a creative voice silenced by jealousy, and of a love unfulfilled - in many ways, her experience is similar to that of many women who not only lived through the war but also bore the brunt of its private consequences for the millions of returned men.

I was listening to 'Sea Shanty for Charles Causley' on R4 this week in which a similar tale is told by Jane Darke, of a child presented at the age of about 6 with a crippled father who dies, and whose mother struggles alone for many years. Causley's Eden Rock is a wonderful evocation of that state of mind and being.

I hope this is of interest and useful. My wife and I did enjoy our visit to Cotehele - the volunteers in the house were all most informative and engaging, the lemon drizzle cake was a fine reward, and the lady in the second-hand bookshop most helpful in finding the things I'm interested in with only ten minutes before closing! Just that little card to shift slightly!

Best wishes

Bert Biscoe

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**From:** "Hunt, Rachel" <[Rachel.Hunt@nationaltrust.org.uk](mailto:Rachel.Hunt@nationaltrust.org.uk)>  
**To:** "[bertbiscoe@btinternet.com](mailto:bertbiscoe@btinternet.com)" <[bertbiscoe@btinternet.com](mailto:bertbiscoe@btinternet.com)>  
**Sent:** Saturday, 27 August 2016, 18:46  
**Subject:** RE: FAO Curator - Great War exhibition - Cotehele [REF:121777326533]

Dear Bert (if I may),

Many thanks for the very interesting information relating to May Cannan. I have to confess I didn't properly look at May's poem, assuming, from the lack of a visible title, that it began on the previous page and was therefore not suitable for an enclosed display. In the light of your email I'm very happy to show both poems, and will adjust the labels accordingly.

I have drafted a label for May's poem; would you mind casting your eye over it to check I've got everything right, and that you're happy with the acknowledgement. Sorry it has to be so brief, when so much could be said. I will share your e-mail, with your permission, with our volunteers who I am sure will be interested to read the 'full version'. Please let me know.

Rachel

**From:** BERT BISCOE [mailto:bertbiscoe@btinternet.com]

**Sent:** 27 August 2016 20:36

**To:** Hunt, Rachel

**Subject:** Re: FAO Curator - Great War exhibition - Cotehele [REF:121777326533]

Hi Rachel,

I must correct myself - May's father was Charles Cannan, Dean of Trinity College, Oxford, and Secretary to the Delegates of the Oxford University Press. He and Q were close friends. They met when Charles published Q's *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. Bevil met May when he went to Trinity in 1910.

I think the Secretary to the Delegates bit means he was the bloke who did the work!

May did train as a nurse and set up a VAD Hospital before the War in Oxford. When War came the VADs were disbanded but the hospital May set up was commandeered, but she and her colleagues were not used. She and her sisters worked at the Oxford University Press for their father. - she went to France in 1915 to run the canteen at Rouen railway station (some of her finest war poetry is from this period) and she ended up in 1918 working in Intelligence in Paris, which is where Bevil found her after the truce. I've attached a scanned photo of her from Charlotte's book. The acknowledgement in the book reads 'By Courtesy Jim Slater'.

The definitive story is told in a beautiful book called 'The Tears of War'. It was conceived and made by Charlotte Fyfe (I think she does herself a disservice of modesty by describing herself as 'Editor'). It includes correspondence, poems and a narrative - it is a tale of tragedy and hope and I found it (remaindered in Waterstones!!!!) very moving - its published by Cavalier Books, Burnham House, Upavon, Wiltshire SN9 6DU. There's at least one second hand copy at Bookends in Fowey. I've met Charlotte Fyfe and she is a lively and very positive person who writes books mainly about keeping chickens and growing turnips! In this period of interest in the Great War I really think that *The Tears of War* could and should be a massive hit!

The ISBN IS 1-899470-18-2

If you wanted to brief your volunteers then finding a copy for them to hand around amongst themselves might be a good thing - I wonder whether, when 2018 comes, the whole story might not be something which could form the kernel of an exhibition at Lanhydrock - Bevil's sister, Foy, (who befriended Daphne du Maurier in the 1920s and showed her Jamaica Inn) lived at Lanhydrock for a number of years until her death. Perhaps you'd be kind enough to share it with them.

best wishes

B

Hello Bert,

Many thanks for your e-mail, and the interesting information it contains. Below are two pictures: on the left, an image of the revised label, and on the right, photo of it in context. I can see that the label needs straightening. I'll go and do that now.

I'll pass the book reference to our volunteers. I'm copying this e-mail to my colleague Paul Holden, House and Collections Manager of Lanhydrock. He is in charge of exhibitions there, and I'm sure he'll be interested to hear your idea.

With kindest regards,

Rachel

**Rachel Hunt**

House and Collections Manager

National Trust, Cotehele, St Dominick, Saltash, Cornwall. PL12 6TA.

## POEM: UNTITLED

By May Wedderburn Cannan (1893-1973)

May Wedderburn Cannan trained as a nurse and set up a VAD hospital near Oxford. The hospital was commandeered, but she was not used. In 1915 she was running the canteen at Rouen Railway Station, and in 1918 she worked in Paris, in Intelligence. Her father, Charles Cannan, was a close friend of Arthur Quiller-Couch – Professor of English Literature and Jesus College, Cambridge, novelist, poet, critic – and man of Fowey.

May was engaged to be married to Couch's son, Bevil, an officer in the Royal Artillery. He tragically died in February 1919, a victim of the Spanish 'flu pandemic. Their marriage never took place.



Thanks to Bert Biscoe, Chairman of the Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch Memorial Fund, for this information.

