



Entrance to War Cloister from Meads.

THE WAR CLOISTER INSCRIPTIONS

Timothy Hands



WINCHESTER
COLLEGE

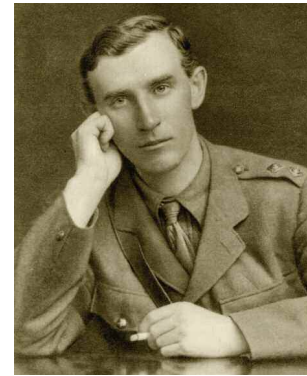
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The War Cloister Inscriptions at Winchester College

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Thanks be to God for the service of these five hundred Wykehamists, who were found faithful unto death amid the manifold chances of the Great War. In the day of battle they forgot not God, who created them to do His will, nor their country, the stronghold of freedom, nor their school, the mother of godliness and discipline. Strong in this threefold faith they went forth from home and kindred to the battle-fields of the world, and treading the path of duty and sacrifice laid down their lives for mankind. Thou therefore, for whom they died, seek not thine own, but serve as they served, and in peace or in war bear thyself ever as Christ's soldier, gentle in all things, valiant in action, steadfast in adversity.

“The 30 years preceding the Great War were the golden age of the public school”, comments Budge Firth in his history of Winchester College. “There was a wave of high confidence. It all seemed too good to be true; and alas! For us, as for the other great schools, it could not permanently endure.”



Raymond Asquith, College, 1892-97.
Killed in action, September 1916.



Herbert Asquith, Trant's, 1894-1900.

On 4th August 1914 the Prime Minister, Asquith, described by Firth as “a symbol and safeguard alike”, declared war. Asquith had five sons at Winchester. Four of his children, two of them Scholars, had by that time left the College; the last, Anthony, also a Scholar, was yet to arrive. The oldest, Raymond, is commemorated in the War Cloister.

His younger brother, the poet Herbert, greeted the outbreak of war with a poem of unashamed mediaeval and chivalric resonances:

Here lies a clerk who half his life had spent
Toiling at ledgers in a city grey,
Thinking that so his days would drift away

With no lance broken in life's tournament:
 Yet ever 'twixt the books and his bright eyes
 The gleaming eagles of the legions came,
 And horsemen, charging under phantom skies,
 Went thundering past beneath the oriflamme.
 And now those waiting dreams are satisfied;
 From twilight to the halls of dawn he went;
 His lance is broken; but he lies content
 With that high hour, in which he lived and died.
 And falling thus he wants no recompense,
 Who found his battle in the last resort;
 Nor needs he any hearse to bear him hence,
 Who goes to join the men of Agincourt.



Memorial to Raymond Asquith, outer wall in War Cloister.

The tone of endorsement and reverence was not to last. “You smug faced crowds with kindling eye”, wrote Siegfried Sassoon in 1917,

Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
 Sneak home and pray you'll never know
 The hell where youth and laughter go.

Three quarters of a million British were killed in the Great War; in all, globally, there were 41 million casualties. “Never glad confident morning again”, concluded Firth, quoting Browning's poem ‘The Lost Leader’.

The challenge of handling the College's response to the First World War was the responsibility of Monty Rendall (1862-1950). Appointed a Don in 1887, Rendall became Second Master and Master in College in 1899, and served as Headmaster from 1911 to 1924. Formidable classicist, rider of a penny-farthing bicycle, and Cambridge soccer blue, Rendall was a slightly self-conscious bachelor and eccentric, much admired by pupils and staff.

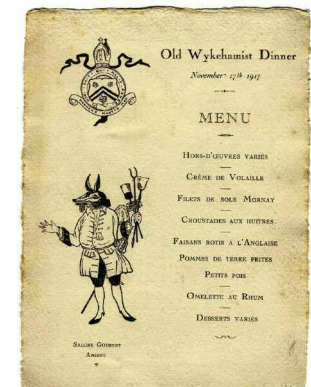


Monty Rendall, by Glyn Philpot, 1924.

“Monty Rendall was an Old Harrovian”, a former pupil recalled, “but was many, many years at Winchester, as College Tutor in my father's time, and then as Second Master, in charge of the College. He was the first layman ever to become Headmaster, also the first Second Master ever to do so, and the first who was not an Old Wykehamist. He was a bachelor. Winchester was his first and only love”.

Weekly, at the close of Sunday evening chapel, Rendall read out, as war progressed, the names on the casualty list. “It must have cost him a great deal”, a pupil recalled “... and I remember that his voice, which was always strong and fearless, would sometimes falter when it came to a name which he felt, if there was a God above, he should not have been called upon to utter.”

According to Shakespeare, 29 English had died at Agincourt, hymned by Herbert Asquith. What would be done by Rendall 500 odd years later to memorialise the 513 Winchester dead? On 17th November 1917, Rendall hosted a dinner in Amiens for all those OWs serving on the Western Front.



Menu from OW Dinner, Amiens, 17th November 1917.

Sixty-nine attended. The aim was to discuss how those who had died already might be honoured: many of those present realised that they would be discussing a memorial likely also to commemorate themselves. The meeting rejected a number of concepts which can now be discerned as of striking modernity: an overseas school, an Academy (“a sort of enlarged *Secunda Classis*”, as one speaker expressed it), a central dining facility and a bursary fund. But the resolution which received unanimous approval was that “a visible and substantial memorial consisting of a building or a group of buildings should be erected in the precincts of the College”. It was further warmly suggested that the memorial should be built in stone and flint in the manner of William of Wykeham’s original buildings.

That same year, the distinguished architect H W Baker (1862-1946) was commissioned to provide “an entirely non-utilitarian structure built only with an eye to perfection”. Baker was especially well regarded for his designs for Empire, especially South Africa and India. In this country he designed Rhodes House, a grandstand at Lord’s (and the still existent figure of Old Father Time to adorn it), and enlarged the Bank of England. He was to become one of the three architects commissioned by the Imperial War Graves Commission to design their war cemeteries, and in many ways War Cloister was his dry run for the largest of these, Tyne Cot (opened in 1927), the final resting place of 11,965 soldiers (of which 8,369 are unnamed) who fell in the battle of Passchendaele.



Sir Herbert Baker,
by Alfred Kingsley Lawrence, c.1939.
©The Governor and Company of the
Bank of England.

The War Cloister was intended to provide a sacred way comparable in beauty and spiritual appeal for the Commoners with the splendid and hallowed buildings provided by Wykeham for his Scholars. “Together, War Cloister and the Boer War Gate form a *Via Sacra* for Commoners, leading to work and worship”, wrote Rendall, intending that “even those who run may read”. Baker’s initial plans were grandiose and involved several new buildings. Expense was not to be spared: materials, for example, were to include local



War Cloister under construction.



Dedication of War Cloister by Edward Grey,
15th July 1922.



Tyne Cot and Rhodes House in Oxford, both designed by Sir Herbert Baker.



flint from Shawford, just south of Winchester, to imitate the original cloister; and stone, for the corners, from India, Africa, Australia, Canada and New Zealand (all ultimately shipped free of charge as gifts). The garden was to be designed by Gertrude Jekyll, whose entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (actually, a quotation from Baker) reads:



Gertrude Jekyll, by William Nicholson, 1920.
©National Portrait Gallery, London.

“Her outstanding possession was the power to see, as a poet, the art and creation of home-making as a whole in relation to Life; the best simple English country life of her day, frugal, yet rich in beauty and comfort; in the building and its furnishing and their homely craftsmanship, in the garden uniting the house with surrounding nature; all in harmony and breathing the spirit of its creator.”



R M Y Gleadowe,
from a photograph
of dons, late 1920s.

The Lombardic script for the commemorative text was to be designed by the distinguished craftsman and artist, R M Y Gleadowe, Art Master at the school at that time. As the project developed, Rendall’s interest in War Cloister deepened almost into the obsessive: he would spend some portion of every day, and often several hours in the day, on the site. The task he set himself was to provide the texts for the inscriptions on the outer wall, and these were a complex and demanding challenge. Almost all of those commemorated were known to him, the majority as his pupils: many of them, such as Asquith’s son Raymond, had been young men of exceptional promise. Even more problematically, Rendall believed Winchester College the perfect place. The school’s unique effect, Budge Firth recalled, was “to give to boys and to Old Wykehamists the vision of Winchester as a holy place” – and such Rendall openly proclaimed it to be. How could he reconcile such beauty and such vision with “the hell where youth and laughter go?”

The challenge was immense. “Day after day and since the term was over, I have been working hard at this inscription”, Rendall wrote to Harold Trevor Baker (MP, and Warden of Winchester 1936-46) in 1922. “It is not an



View from the Warden’s Garden.

inscription in the usual sense of the word”, he explained, “but a prose poem, which fell naturally into biblical language. The Lombardic script has been designed, with much labour and skill, to suit the special qualities of flint work”. In January that year, he informed Baker that “the inscription must be adopted soon: I have now reached finality, I think”. But there were still over two years of tweaking to go.

Space was Rendall’s first problem. The available length of walls could only accommodate a certain number of characters. “Each clause has to obey the maximum numbers of letters”, Rendall explained, “the first 266, the other three 160.” In many ways, Rendall can lay claim to authorship of the nation’s



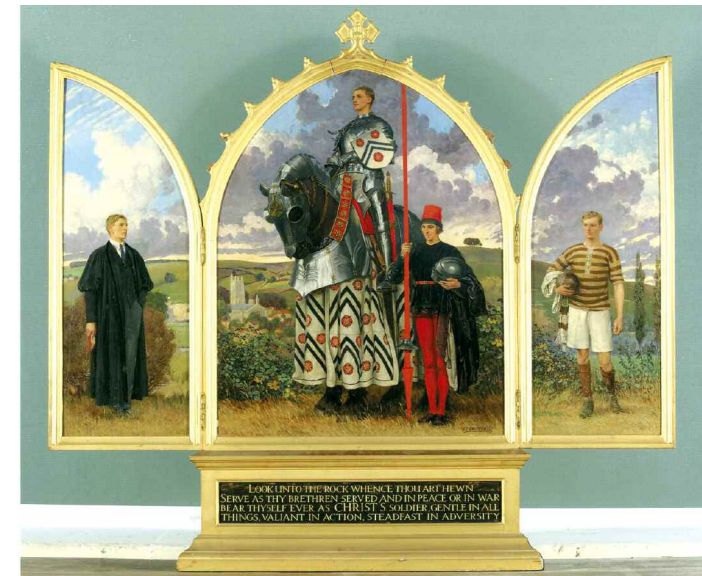
Inscriptions from the outer walls of
War Cloister, designed by
R M Y Gleadowe.

first Grade I listed tweet; but he managed to achieve in addition the placing of keywords in conspicuously key places; thus “Peace” in the centre of the north range faces “Stronghold of Freedom” in the south.

Language was Rendall’s second problem. English was generally the preferred language for memorials to the First World War. For Rendall, Winchester was *par excellence* the classical school: and his daily stock-in-trade was translation not only from Latin, but more particularly into it. Rendall’s ability and experience in the vernacular were thus less finely honed than his skills in the classical languages. “Rendall’s intellectual powers were not quite of the highest order even in the classics”, Firth, slightly acerbically, comments. “He published a book of verse which is unbelievably bad. His ear and his taste were faulty. In his classical compositions this imperfection was concealed by thorough training. In English he was left more to his own natural resources: these were not enough to preserve him from error.”

The general popularity of Latin in lapidary inscriptions in part relates to the concision possible in Latin as opposed to the diffuse nature of English. Essentially, Rendall was forced by the spirit of the times to work in a language he felt undesirable because prolix. His compromise was to place in small letters on the inscription anything which in the inflections and declensions of Latin could have been avoided: *for whom, but, and in, or in, be to, for the, too, of, off.*

The third and most taxing difficulty for Rendall was the message. In contemplating the texts, Rendall has to reconsider his attitudes to war and to religion. These views were idiosyncratic. Rendall’s “religious faith was simple and strong”, Firth tells us, “learned in his father’s Cotswold rectory, and apparently never modified”. He was “indifferent to formal theology and antagonistic to ecclesiasticism”. “The Rectory stood upon the rock of Faith”, Rendall recalled. This meant that whereas many had their doubts about war, Rendall did not. Even Spencer Leeson, a subsequent Headmaster and one of Rendall’s acolytes, could concede that many Christians “believe with all their hearts that fighting is not a possible duty for a Christian”. For Rendall, however, war was mediaevally chivalric, humanly fine. He commissioned from the artist Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale a triptych representing Knightly Service, a pictorial realisation of his (rather far-fetched) notion that the public school system had evolved from mediaeval schools of chivalry. The most visible remnant of such belief can be seen on the cross in War Cloister, which has two Crusader Knights on opposing surfaces. Baker sought to have this design adopted by the Imperial War Graves Commission as



Triptych with scenes of Winchester College,
by Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale, 1926.

standard, but the debate was won by Sir Reginald Blomfield, who proposed the now highly familiar Latin cross with bronze longsword, blade down.

Rendall’s attitude to war was also influenced by his absorption in the classics. “In his love of beauty in nature and art and literature he was almost more Greek than English; ... and indeed here was where he really lived”, Firth tells us. “There was in him blending not often seen of the puritan and the Hellenist, all the puritan strength of principle, and all the Hellenist’s love of beauty.” Others could not see war, however, in this classical way. For Wilfred Owen, for example, the often quoted sentiment of Horace that it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country (*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*) was now “the old lie”. Thus, over two years, Rendall had to redefine his views of war, adapting it to the views of others, no small task for a man who not infrequently found compromise inimical.

Rendall’s main tactic was to divert attention from any difficulties with his native religious beliefs by appearing to evoke and espouse those of Hellenism: the events of Thermopylae, the funeral speeches of Homer and Thucydides, the whole panoply of classical commemorations of death in battle.



One of four small gift-stones from the ruins of Ypres, engraved with the double cross of Ypres.

Rendall would surprise readers back into the Latinate learning of their early accepting and obedient childhood by employing innately persuasive classical resonances in the inscriptions. Rendall's composition is dominated by the classical device of the tricolon (e.g. the threefold faith of God, country, school; or the gentleness, valour and steadfastness of the Wykehamist). There would have been one tricolon more, a mention of air, land and sea, but there was not room for it – resultingly, it is only the Army, not Navy or Air Force, which is commemorated. The rhythms of the inscription are the dactylic rhythms of Latin and Greek hexameter (e.g. nor their country, the stronghold of freedom ... laid down their lives for mankind). There is a particularly strong echo of the *Aeneid* Book VI, one of Rendall's favourite texts, where Anchises charges Aeneas to behave now like a Roman: *tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento; hae tibi erunt artes; pacisque imponere morem, parcere subiectis, et debellare superbos* (Roman! let this be your care, this your art; to rule over the nations and impose the ways of peace, to spare the underdog, and pull down the proud).

But this deflective cultural tactic could not totally conceal Rendall's theological difficulties, his changing views of war, of Christ, and Mary, and of resurrection.

"I recaptured *warfare*, which I love.... I would accept *service*", Rendall explained to Harold Baker – and *Service* it was indeed finally to be. Likewise in an early version, Wykehamists "put on their armour with good cheer", whereas in the final version they do not have armour at all. Rendall's view of Christ also alters. In the first version, the dead are commemorated as "Christian soldiers" who "followed the example of their Master Jesus Christ and bear his sword". "Difficulty is felt about connecting the name of Jesus Christ with active service", Rendall told the Warden, "I do not think I feel it." Nonetheless, in the final version, the dead are not described in either of these ways.

Unusually, given his generally moderate churchmanship, Rendall had a strangely large measure of reverence towards the Virgin Mary. "His personal

religion dwelt constantly upon the imagery of the virgin mother and her child", Firth explains. Mary played no part in the original inscription, but by the end the mention of "home and kindred" introduced the idea of the *mater dolorosa* and the suffering of women as passive griever in a man's war.



Roof bosses in War Cloister: Sir Herbert Baker, architect; and monogram of St Mary.

Rendall's final theological difficulty concerned the resurrection. "Rendall preached an essentially man-centred message. Specific references to the resurrection of Christ are few", Firth tells us. Originally the Wykehamical dead laid down their lives for the redemption of mankind. This concept was soon dropped. Originally the Wykehamical deaths ensured worldwide peace. This concept departed also. To end his inscription Rendall initially talked of peace, and the inscription ended with the word everlasting. But in the final version the last concept is of *peace or war*, and the final word is *adversity*. Indeed, as though to emphasise the point, the words *adversity* and *mankind* are placed opposite each other.

Rendall ultimately accommodates his difficulties with resurrection by a total change of approach in the final inscription. Originally the final inscription was about the dead: it started: "they were Christian soldiers, gentle in spirit, valiant in action, steadfast in adversity". In total contrast, the final version is not about the dead but about us, the living: "thou, therefore, for whom they died...", it starts. And the qualities of gentleness, valour and steadfastness, which in the original described the dead, in the final version represent the values required of us, the living. This has slightly unsurprising similarities with the Platonic concept of metempsychosis, the supposed transmigration at death of the soul of a human being or animal into a new body of the same or a

different species. We become what the soldiers were – the souls of the dead are transferred into the bodies of the living.

The War Cloister is designed lastingly to influence all those who walk through it. Walking into the Cloister from South Africa Gate, there is an immediate challenge to confront head on: it is the words “in the day of battle”. Turning left below that inscription there is a new text straight ahead: “Valiant in action”. All those walking through the Cloister are supposed to be conscious of that challenge; and, as Wykehamists daily turn right through the arch and out to the world preserved for them by the sacrifice of others, they cannot but realise the significance and import of the challenge which awaits them in their life ahead.



One of the two angels on War Cloister Gate, copies of original designs by R M Y Gleadowe.

Almost a hundred years on, War Cloister continues to fulfil its original purpose: a memorial daily to be traversed with thoughtfulness and a commemorative respect. After the Second World War the names of another 285 former pupils were



War Cloister one hundred years on.



C R W Nevinson, *Twilight*, 1916.

added, this time facing into the Cloister rather than out of it. Periodically odd individual names are added, as another hitherto unknown casualty from these conflicts becomes identified. In 2006, for example, the name of a lab technician, Cecil Offer, was added – the Winchester memorial being unusual in limiting those commemorated to former pupils and teachers, and also specifying respective ranks – characteristic indications of Rendall’s views on social order. In the passage between the Cloister



Field Marshal Wavell in War Cloister, 1948.

and South Africa Gate (the latter itself a memorial to the Boer War, designed by F L Pearson in 1903) another 13 names are commemorated of those who have fallen in conflict since the Second World War. These include Archibald Wavell, son of Field Marshal Wavell, who rededicated the War Cloister in 1948, and who himself lies buried within the ancient Cloister adjoining the College Chapel.

Rendall did not die until 1950. There are few memorials to him,

or books by him. For Rendall, it had always been a privilege to live in Winchester. Dwelling in College had been to him a daily ecstasy. He intended the Cloister to commemorate not only men fallen in the service of their country but also a whole way of life. Baker intended it to be “elemental, enshrining eternal values in the style beyond style”. Rudyard Kipling regarded it as “significance itself”. A Latin phrase, originating in the Greek Euripides, is commonly used about schools: *Spartam nactus es; hanc exorna*. “Sparta has fallen to your lot, adorn it by your actions.” Loretto School adopted it as its motto in 1827. Some 95 years later (1922) the civilised scholar and Headmaster, J C Nichol, was using the phrase to encourage the boys of The Portsmouth Grammar School to volunteer for war service. Rendall adapted the phrase: “I went on the principle *athenas nactus es; has exorna*”, he explained. Pupils needed to appreciate that they inhabited not the motley buildings of Sparta, but the classical temples and academies of Athens. Wykehamists inhabited a plateau, a privileged place, a paradise. All the more should they adorn it by their actions. What mattered to Rendall was less the place but the consequences of place.

“The buildings of Winchester College form one of the cardinal monuments of English architecture. They provide the perfect example of the perpendicular style”, explains John Harvey in Roger Custance’s *Sixth Centenary Essays*. Rendall’s achievement was to provide an equally cardinal monument to commemorate his former pupils. His message continues its relevance for the society of today.