

Jack in the Belfry

Terry Eagleton *London Review of Books* Vol. 38 No. 17 · 8 September 2016

- [buy](#) *The Trials of the King of Hampshire: Madness, Secrecy and Betrayal in Georgian England* by [Elizabeth Foyster](#)

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The line between eccentricity and insanity in the English aristocracy has always been hard to draw, and perhaps never more so than in the case of John Charles Wallop, third Earl of Portsmouth. Born in 1767 at the family's Hampshire residence of Hurstbourne Park, Wallop grew into a child who betrayed signs of being what his contemporaries would have called a simpleton. He was sent to be tutored by the Rev. George Austen, father of Jane, but proved a slow learner and had a serious stammer. Jane was still to be born at the time he lived in her home, but she encountered Wallop at a ball in later life and thought him presentable enough. Nothing this keen-eyed observer of humanity says of him would suggest that she found him in any way odd. She was, however, less impressed by his dim-witted younger brother Coulson, whom she regarded as a cad given to drunken habits and indelicate language. He could easily be a minor character in one of her novels. Brains were not the Portsmouth family's strong point. Wallop's uncle had been elected master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, but according to one contemporary observer was completely illiterate.

John Charles was sent to grammar school at the age of seven, where one of his fellow pupils described him as the laughing stock of the school for his 'singularly foolish silly ways and antics'. Though not exactly an 'idiot' in the judgment of one doctor, he was a crybaby, sang grotesquely out of tune and regularly fouled his clothes and bed. He was also in the habit of skiving off from school to visit a local hovel, where he ate bacon and greens with a carrier. It was a foretaste of his remarkably egalitarian attitude towards his own servants later in life, a familiarity which was to do him no good at all.

Unlike his younger brothers, he did not go on to Eton. He could be a belligerent child, and once pulled the ears of the 11-year-old Byron. Byron retaliated by throwing shells at him and broke a window. Even as a boy, the legendary daredevil was not to be messed about. Years later, however, Byron testified to Portsmouth's sanity when he was put on trial – testimony that might have carried more weight had Byron himself not been widely considered to be mad. Privately, however, he regarded his fellow nobleman as a 'fool of an earl', having perhaps not entirely forgiven the ear-pulling episode.

Wallop succeeded to his father's title in 1797, but was not allowed to manage his fortune, household and vast estates, which included a Norman castle and close to 13,000 acres of land in Wexford. Instead, his formidable mother, Urania, ran his affairs, while Portsmouth himself, one of the wealthiest landowners in England, was provided with what amounted to pocket money. (He did better in this respect than the feeble-minded Mr Dick of *David Copperfield*, who is supplied with pocket money but not allowed to spend it.) Not long after becoming third earl, he fled from home for a brief period in the company of his Swiss valet, though whether this was an abduction or an elopement is hard to say. The valet later threatened to expose the 'repeated Sodomitical attempts' that his master had allegedly made on him, though Portsmouth's ignorance of sex makes the claim fairly improbable. If it had been shown to be true, however, he could have faced the death penalty. Fifty men were executed for sodomy in England between 1805 and 1832. In the event, the Portsmouth family stepped in, squashed the valet and destroyed his reputation, despite his plausible claim that the earl was happy to escape from a home where he was stripped of authority and placed under constant surveillance. As Elizabeth Foyster remarks in her assiduously researched, crisply written biography, 'nobody was interested in the grievances of a low-born

French speaker when they stood opposed to the words of an honourable English nobleman and his family.'

Not long after the botched elopement/abduction, Urania ordered that her son be strapped to his bed. She also threatened to place him in the custody of the chief physician at Bethlem, England's most notorious madhouse. Her own sister had grown paranoid during the years of the French Revolution, convinced that her life was under threat from the insurgent masses of Twickenham. She spent the rest of her days confined to an asylum. Another of Portsmouth's relatives kidnapped the woman he loved at pistol-point, and later declared that he was the figure described in the Book of Revelations as bringing peace on earth. He also challenged Napoleon to single combat. He, too, ended up in what was politely known as a Private House. The family were well schooled in how to close down any members who threatened to become a public embarrassment, and Wallop could be forgiven for suspecting that he was next in line.

Instead, Urania found another kind of keeper for her wayward son in the form of a wife, Grace Norton, whom he married in 1799. At 47 years of age, 15 years older than the earl himself, she seemed sufficiently mature and level-headed to keep him safely bridled. She appears to have had no illusions about her husband's mental agility, but it is unlikely she thought him mad since the insane could not enter into a contract of marriage. She was, however, party to an agreement by which Portsmouth handed over all of his estate to four trustees, an action later to be adduced as proof of his madness. The Lord Chancellor of the day observed that the earl had chosen to 'put himself under fetters very similar to those which belong to a Commission of Lunacy'. If he really was out of his mind, however, he would not have been deemed legally capable of signing such a deed. It was a Catch-22 situation: if Portsmouth signed the document voluntarily he was clearly off his head, but if he was then he couldn't validly sign it.

Grace proved an excellent mother to Portsmouth, who to the astonishment of his dinner guests would sometimes stop eating, lay his head on her neck, fondle her affectionately and sob loudly, while she humoured him like a fractious child. He would then resume eating with a hearty appetite. He also took to arranging secret meetings in the woods with young working-class women from around the estate – not for the traditional patrician purpose, but so that they might bleed him with a case of lancets he carried around with him. Since he paid the women for doing so, he was rarely short of volunteers. One volunteer reported that Portsmouth was obsessed with how women's pockets bulged out, believing that this was because they carried basins under their skirts in which to collect the blood of the men they bled. Spilling his blood into female basins seems to have been his substitute for sexual intercourse, an activity with which he was unfamiliar in both theory and practice. He scoffed incredulously at a member of his staff who tried to inform him of the facts of life, and seemed to believe that a woman's pregnancy lasted for nine years. Brothels he regarded as places where gentlemen went armed with their lancets. He did, however, have some acquaintance with masturbation, since on some occasions when his arm was tied for him to be bled he would delightedly watch the rising of the veins while applying his other hand to a similarly tumescent part of his body. It was, he told his doctor, the only situation in which he ever had an erection. Given a choice between giving up his wife and his case of lancets, he added, there was no question of which he would abandon.

Compared with his so-called black jobs, however, being bled in the woods seems relatively rational. 'Black jobs' was the name Portsmouth gave to those of his activities which involved a morbid obsession with death. When the young daughter of one of his workmen was dying, the earl, to whom the girl was a complete unknown, insisted on being present at her death and had to be forcibly

prevented from entering the house by her outraged father. The workman was able to allow his daughter to die in peace, but only at the cost of not being present at her deathbed himself.

Portsmouth also turned up uninvited at funerals. On one occasion he posed as chief mourner at the burial of a total stranger, and gleefully reported that he was served turkey and wine at the lunch that followed. He would request his servants to place logs on their shoulders as though they were coffins, and would then walk behind the bogus cortège singing psalms. He knew all the main hearse drivers in London, and would visit undertakers to find out if there were any forthcoming funerals. He would then join the procession in his phaeton, driving so close as to scrape the wheels of the mourning coaches while laughing and shaking his whip. Admirably egalitarian in his necrophiliac tastes, he once accompanied to the grave the body of a former servant of his who had landed up in a lunatic asylum. When his park keeper told him that his wife was seriously ill, Portsmouth replied that he was glad of it and hoped she would die soon. It was not quite the attitude of a model paternalist landlord. At the funeral of another servant, he winked and laughed constantly at the scandalised members of the congregation. There were times, however, when it proved difficult not to join in his merriment. When he officiated at burials, he would read out psalms by the graveside in such a droll manner that some mourners had to stifle their laughter.

Bell-ringing was another of his obsessions. He would set off in heavy rain to walk a mile from his house to ring the bells at a church when someone died. As soon as any church service was over, he would rush out of his pew and dash up to the belfry, where he would strip to the waist and demand to be called Jack. His campanological skills were not of the finest. He did not understand the idea of ringing in a peal, so someone had to stand beside him in order to catch the rope and hand it to him when it was his turn. There were times when he took the fun a little too far, as when he once placed a rope around another ringer's neck. Someone removed it just as the bell was swinging upwards, otherwise the man would have been hanged. To keep their master amused, his servants strung ropes across hooks in the stables so that he could pretend he was ringing bells. His long-suffering domestic staff were desperate to escape his childish pranks: if the earl wanted to play hide and seek, they would pretend not to know where he was hiding so that he would leave them alone for a while. One manservant had to put a broomstick between his master's legs and chase him around the room. Portsmouth also liked him to rap the pig-tail of his wig against his neck like a knocker, shouting: 'Is anybody at home?' It was a pertinent inquiry.

Portsmouth was both bully and victim, cruel and pitiable. He whipped his horses mercilessly, and sometimes his underlings too. He tortured his oxen, knocking them on their heads with an axe he had made specially for the purpose, and roaring with laughter when they bellowed in agony. Sticking frogs with the prong of a fork was another of his pastimes. Domestic servants he disliked were held down and forced to drink beer mixed with jalap and mustard, while others were fed with nothing but water-gruel and mustard for a week. He threw himself on one of his coachmen with such force that he broke the man's leg. If a child who passed him in the street did not raise his hat, Portsmouth would order him to be caned.

When the United Irish rebellion of 1798 raged around his Wexford estates, he wrote to an uncle that his tenants had been slaughtered and his estate laid to waste. All he seems to have cared about, however, was the impact of the loss of rent on his finances, which he used as an excuse for not helping his uncle out with a gift of money. From an Irish viewpoint, the Portsmouths were archetypal absentee landlords, a phenomenon that would contribute a century or so later to the ousting of that class from its dominant position in the country.

Yet the nobleman was sinned against as well as sinning. When his wife died, an event on which he commented 'with great glee', he entered into a second marriage with Mary Ann Hanson, who seems to have detested him from the outset. She soon struck up a sexual liaison with one William Alder, who was discovered by a servant in bed with Lady Portsmouth while Portsmouth himself lay by the couple's side, apparently asleep. It was troilism with a new twist. This, too, would serve later as evidence of his lunacy. It was proper for Alder to attend his wife at night, the earl insisted, since she was subject to hysterics and Alder was a doctor. The first statement might just have been true, but the second was not. Mary Ann turned out to be a husband batterer who kept a whip under her pillow, beat her spouse regularly (not least when he was naked in bed) and encouraged his domestic staff to do the same. Alder joined in with gusto. In a carnivalesque reversal, a wife and her live-in lover mocked and humiliated the lord of the manor, with the co-operation of some of their lackeys and relatives. When he heard that his wife was returning to Hurstbourne Park after a visit to Edinburgh, Portsmouth fortified the place against her arrival with forty or fifty labourers armed with bludgeons. There is no doubt that he was monstrously ill-used, though it doesn't explain his own callous behaviour to others long before a bruiser of a second wife appeared on the scene. Foyster wonders whether her brutal treatment might not have pushed Portsmouth over the edge into madness, but this is rather like claiming that winning the Republican nomination may have pushed Donald Trump over the edge into egoism. It cannot, however, have helped, not least because the earl was a man with a keen sense of his own social position, easily offended if others seemed less than respectful of his title.

If Portsmouth were to produce a child, his brother Newton would find himself disinherited. Mary Ann did indeed give birth to a daughter, though the child was almost certainly Alder's. Portsmouth himself believed that her pregnancy was the result of her having consulted a doctor, and thought the medic in question the cleverest fellow in the world to have put his wife in the family way after just one consultation. It was time for Newton to make a long-pondered legal move against his brother, who had now taken to calling himself King of Hampshire. If Newton could establish that his brother was insane, his marriage would be retrospectively invalid and his child (who was not his child in any case) could not inherit. Portsmouth was hauled in front of a Commission for Lunacy, who decided that he was of unsound mind and deprived him of all control over his property. He was allowed to go on living at Hurstbourne Park, where he died in his 86th year. He had survived from the age of Johnson to the age of Dickens. Struck down by ill-health, Newton did not live to enjoy the fruits of his scheming, and a debt-ridden, poverty-stricken Mary Ann died in exile in Canada, a social outcast. Nobody except Grace Norton comes out of the story well.

Foyster has turned a great mound of papers lying neglected in the Lambeth Palace Library into a grippingly readable tale, enriching it with a good many other sources of information. With the best liberal etiquette, she refuses to judge whether her protagonist was genuinely mad. Given the cultural relativity of the concept, her wariness is understandable. Shakespeare, whose drama is deeply interested in such matters, seems to regard sanity as a question of the internal coherence of one's speaking or acting, along with its conformity to generally accepted standards of rationality. Neither criterion is rock-solid. Some might suggest that the answer to whether Portsmouth was insane is an unequivocal yes and no. He was of sound mind in some respects, whatever that may mean, but not in others. He was sharp in money matters, quick at figures, could speak decent French, had a thorough understanding of farming and was able to conduct himself in public with propriety, at least from time to time. On the other hand, there are aspects of his behaviour which seem clearly psychotic. Being afflicted with psychotic delusions, however, does not generally mean

that you can't pull on your trousers or engage in polite conversation. There is no necessary contradiction between knowing the price of beef and beating your cattle over the head.