



Alfred Noyes: 1880 - 1958

In September 1980 the newly formed Ventnor & District Local History Society held its first exhibition, which was devoted to the writer Alfred Noyes. The exhibition was held in Ventnor Library, as the new Society had yet to find a permanent home and was still camped out in a small room in Salisbury Gardens, provided by Ventnor Council.

Alfred Noyes was very much a local figure, having lived with his family in Lisle Combe in St Lawrence from 1929 until his death in 1958. He is buried in the Catholic Cemetery in Freshwater.

Born in 1880, he was brought up in Wales. He studied at Exeter College Oxford, but never completed his degree, missing a crucial exam to attend a meeting with his publisher about his first book, published in 1902 when he was 21. He is best known now for narrative poems: *The Highwayman*, first published in 1906, is probably his best known work, voted into the top twenty in a BBC poll in 1995 to find the nation's favourite poem, and the opening lines are still familiar to many of us from our school days:

*The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees.
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding - riding - riding -
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.*



Although he earned his living as a successful writer, Noyes always had problems with his eyesight, becoming blind by the end of his life. During the First World War, his poor sight debarred him from serving at the front, and he was attached to the Foreign Office, working alongside John Buchan producing propaganda. In 1907 he had married, Garnett Daniels, the youngest daughter of a veteran of the American Civil War, and in 1913 she persuaded him to undertake a lecture tour in her home country, which was a great success. Noyes worked and lectured in America regularly throughout the rest of his life, and for several years he was Visiting Professor of English Literature at Princeton University, where his students included budding author F Scott Fitzgerald.

Garnett died in 1927 and a year later Noyes married Mary Weld Blundell, a widow whose husband had died during the first world war. Mary was a Catholic, and Noyes himself converted to Catholicism. In 1929 Alfred and Mary moved to Lisle Combe at St Lawrence, where they brought up their three children. Noyes spent most of the second world war in America and Canada, lecturing and promoting his country's war effort. When he returned permanently to live in Lisle Combe in 1949 he was almost completely blind; the photograph here was taken in his study and dates from that time. Although he had to dictate most of his work, he continued writing and publishing. In 1952 he brought out a book of verse for children which included another poem still popular today 'Daddy Fell Into the Pond'.

There was a more serious side to his work. *The Victory Ball* (first published in America as *A Victory Dance*) was written after he'd attended a 'Victory Ball' held in London to celebrate the Armistice. It describes the guests unashamedly eating, drinking, dancing and flirting, which he clearly saw as an inappropriate way to mark the end of a war that had cost so many millions of lives. It is a powerful poem, starting with the words:

*The cymbals crash,
And the dancers walk,
With long white stockings
And arms of chalk,
Butterfly skirts,
And white breasts bare,
And shadows of dead men
Watching 'em there.*

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST
A VICTORY DANCE
By Alfred Noyes



Lesley Telford, Ventnor & District Local History Society <https://www.ventnorheritage.org.uk/> Sources: documents and photographs in our collection. Picture of 'A Victory Dance' first published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, 1920