

Five Little-Known Facts about Britain's Literary Heritage

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In this week's Dispatches from The Secret Library, Dr Oliver Tearle offers a taste of the literary trivia on offer in his new book about literary Britain

Today, this blog turns five years old. I'd like to thank everyone who's supported it since its beginnings on 1 December 2012, whenever you happened to discover us. And as it's our five-year anniversary, today seems like a nice moment to tell you a bit more about my new book, which is full of interesting literary trivia about Britain, and which I unveiled in a fact-filled blog post last month.

British history is steeped in interesting literary associations and connections. My new book, *Britain by the Book: A Curious Tour of Our Literary Landscape* (John Murray), gathers together some of the lesser-known and more surprising facts about Britain's literary past. For instance, did you know...

A Manchester librarian invented the world's most famous thesaurus as a way of coping with depression. The terms 'Roget' and 'thesaurus' have become, happily, synonymous: although dictionaries of synonyms existed before Peter Mark Roget (1779-1869) published his *Thesaurus* in 1852, Roget was the first person to apply the term 'thesaurus' to such a book. By the time it was published, Roget had been at work on his thesaurus for almost half a century, since 1805 when he was a young medical professional working in Manchester. Roget suffered from bouts of depression throughout his life, and list-making – specifically, compiling lists of words with similar meanings to each other – appears to have been his way of coping with the blacker periods in his life, of bringing order to a chaotic and unpredictable world.

The premiere of the world's longest-running play was slated by critics. On 6 October 1952, a new Agatha Christie play, *The Mousetrap*, had its premiere in the Theatre Royal in Nottingham. Leading the cast were Sheila Sim and her husband Richard Attenborough. Early signs hardly suggested the play was likely to prove the record-breaking smash hit it went on to become. For one thing, many of the reviews were unfavourable. Christie herself thought the play would be lucky to run for more than eight months. After its premiere at Nottingham, *The Mousetrap* transferred to London, where it has remained – a handful of tours excepted – ever since, for (so far) over 25,000 performances with no signs of its popularity dwindling.

The woman who helped to preserve Stratford-upon-Avon for posterity as Shakespeare's birthplace was the most popular novelist of the late nineteenth century. To say that Marie Corelli (1855-1924) was a popular writer is, remarkably, to play down just how successful she was. Her books sold millions of copies, and her admirers included Winston Churchill, William Ewart Gladstone, and numerous members of the British royal family. But now her novels are little-read, with *The*

Sorrows of Satan (1895) remaining the best known (or least forgotten). Corelli and her lifelong companion Bertha Vyver lived at Mason Croft in Stratford-upon-Avon from 1901 until Corelli's death in 1924. Corelli's eccentricities were well noted by her neighbours, but she also liked annoying the residents of Stratford with some altogether more charitable activities: in 1900, she learned that Sir Theodore Martin intended to obscure the bust of Shakespeare in Holy Trinity Church by erecting a memorial to his wife. Corelli energetically campaigned against this act of 'vandalism'. Mason Croft, where Corelli lived for a number of years, is now the home of the Shakespeare Institute.

The creator of Peter Pan, J. M. Barrie, also founded Britain's first celebrity cricket team. On a summer's day in 1887, J. M. Barrie was in the Surrey village of Shere and came up with an idea: his fondness for cricket inspired him to form the Allahakbarries – effectively the first celebrity cricket team – which, over the next few decades, would boast some of the most celebrated writers of the day: H. G. Wells, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, G. K. Chesterton, Jerome K. Jerome, P. G. Wodehouse, and A. A. Milne. However, they weren't exactly promising cricketing material (Doyle being the notable exception): during the train journey to their first match, Barrie realised that one of his players didn't even know which side of the bat to hit the ball with. Another player had turned up to the railway station in his pyjamas. The result of their first match, which they played at Shere against a team of locals, was really never in doubt: they were roundly trounced.

Three days before she died, Jane Austen wrote a satirical poem about the people of Winchester. Probably the most famous person buried in Winchester Cathedral is Jane Austen, who died in the city in 1817. Three days before her death, Austen wrote a poem about the city, 'Venta' (the Latin for Winchester), a light-hearted verse celebrating the city's saint, Swithun. It begins:

When Winchester races first took their beginning
It is said the good people forgot their old Saint
Not applying at all for the leave of Saint Swithin
And that William of Wykeham's approval was faint.

The races however were fixed and determined
The company came and the Weather was charming
The Lords and the Ladies were satin'd and ermin'd
And nobody saw any future alarming.

But when the old Saint was informed of these doings
He made but one spring from his shrine to the roof
Of the Palace which now lies so sadly in ruins
And then he address'd them all standing aloof.

The poem is written with the same satiric spirit which informs Austen's novels, gently mocking the people of Winchester for going to the races on their city's saint's day. The poem was allowed to languish in manuscript form until 1906, when it was finally published.

If this has whetted your appetite for more bookish trivia, then *Britain by the Book: A Curious Tour of Our Literary Landscape* may just be the book you're after. It contains dozens of stories like these which, I hope, will surprise, amaze, amuse, move, and baffle, by turns. Consider it a kind of guidebook and trivia book rolled into one. Only don't try actually rolling it into one, as that's one of its few drawbacks: it doesn't roll easily. But you can't have everything.

Britain by the Book: A Curious Tour of Our Literary Landscape by Oliver Tearle is out now in hardcover, published by John Murray.