



Five Fascinating Facts about Edward Lear

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Interesting Edward Lear facts: concerning his life and his contribution to nonsense literature

1. He helped to popularise the limerick. Although he did not invent the form, the five-line comic verse known as the limerick (though nobody is quite sure why) in effect came of age with Edward Lear's popular series of poems published in 1846 as the *Book of Nonsense*. We composed our own limericks (about Victorian writers) in this post.
2. He coined the word 'runcible' – though nobody is sure what it precisely means. First appearing in Lear's 1870 poem 'The Owl and the Pussy-Cat', the word 'runcible' is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as simply 'A nonsense word originally used by Edward Lear'. Lear didn't help matters: he applied the word to a spoon, his hat, a wall, and even his cat. Whatever it means, the word clearly had rather wide-ranging applications. However, Runcible Spoon following its use in 'The Owl and the Pussy-Cat', the definition of 'runcible spoon' as being 'a kind of fork that is curved like a spoon' grew up, although one problem with this definition is that it wasn't borne out by Lear's own illustrations of the device (see right).
3. He was also an accomplished painter. Indeed, Lear's very first book was not a book of poetry but a collection of drawings of parrots, published when he was just 19: *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots*. As a young twenty-something man he was even employed by the Zoological Society, as well as by the Earl of Derby, who had a private menagerie of animals whom Lear would draw and paint.
4. And he was a composer, too. Lear set some of his friend Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poems to music in the 1850s, perhaps most famously the 'Tears, Idle Tears' song from Tennyson's *The Princess* (1847). Lear was not a professionally trained musician, so he got the assistance of E. F. Rimbault on the project.
5. He wrote a little-known sequel to perhaps his most famous poem, 'The Owl and the Pussycat'. Some years after 'The Owl and the Pussycat' was published in 1871, Lear wrote a follow-up poem, 'The Children of the Owl and the Pussycat', although it remained unfinished at his death. The poem takes a rather tragic turn, as the Owl and Pussy-Cat's offspring tell us of the death of their feline mother some five years earlier, and the resulting single-parent upbringing they had. You can read the draft of the poem [here](#).

If you enjoyed these Edward Lear facts, take a look at our interesting Lewis Carroll facts – and our facts about that classic of nonsense literature, 'Jabberwocky'.