

Ernest Dowson

Five Reasons Everyone Should Know Ernest Dowson

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What's the connection between wine, poetry, *Gone with the Wind*, and soccer? In a couple of previous posts, on George Meredith and Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, we've endeavoured to find five interesting things about two of Victorian literature's neglected figures. Now it's the turn of Ernest Dowson – decadent poet. Some of these are particularly surprising.

1. Ernest Dowson coined the phrase 'the days of wine and roses'. This was in a poem whose long Latin title was borrowed from the Roman poet Horace, 'Vita Summa Brevis Spem Nos Vetat Incohare Longam' (which can be translated as 'The brief sum of life forbids us the hope of enduring long'). The second of the two stanzas of this short poem runs: 'They are not long, the days of wine and roses: / Out of a misty dream / Our path emerges for a while, then closes / Within a dream.'
2. He is responsible for several book and film titles, notably *Gone with the Wind*. Margaret Mitchell took the title of her vast American novel from another of Dowson's poems, which (again!) sports a long Latin title borrowed from Horace, 'Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae', or 'I am not as I was in the reign of good Cynara' (commonly known, for perhaps obvious reasons, as 'the Cynara poem'). The phrase 'gone with the wind' appears in this poem and Mitchell 'borrowed' it for her novel, having rejected working titles for her book including *Pansy* and *Ba! Ba! Black Sheep*. Dowson also gave Michael Moorcock the titles for two of the volumes of his *Dancers at the End of Time* series of science fiction novels, *The Hollow Lands* and *The End of All Songs*. Oh, and apparently the name Cynara means 'artichoke' in Greek.
3. He is the first person (on record) to have referred to 'soccer'. Though he spelled it differently, as 'socca', in a letter of 1889, it's clear enough that Dowson is referring to the game of football. This may strike us as surprising, since the image of Dowson we have is of a dandy and aesthete, a sensitive poet and decadent; but when we look at the context of the word's first recorded use, it makes more sense: 'I absolutely decline to see socca' matches'.
4. He translated *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* into English. This classic eighteenth-century epistolary novel by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, better known to English readers as *Dangerous Liaisons*, was translated by Dowson in the 1890s, and shows the range of his talents – not only was he a gifted poet but also a talented translator. (Dowson also translated the poetry of Verlaine into English.) The scandalous nature of this novel may have appealed to Dowson (who harboured an affection for an eleven-year-old girl named Adelaide 'Missie' Foltinowicz, who was possibly the inspiration for his Cynara poem). Dowson died of alcoholism, aged 32, at a friend's house in 1900 (not in a wine bar, as is sometimes claimed), his untimely demise perhaps accelerated by his heavy drinking after Missie married a tailor in 1897 (Dowson appears to have been crushed by the marriage).
5. He inspired the Cole Porter song 'Always True to You in My Fashion' from the musical *Kiss Me, Kate*. In the lyrics to this song, and the song's title, Porter alludes to the refrain from Dowson's Cynara poem, where each stanza ends with the declaration, 'I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion'. According to his fellow decadent poet and friend, Arthur Symons, Dowson's favourite line of poetry was Edgar Allan Poe's 'The viol, the violet and the vine'. But we'll leave you with perhaps Dowson's most celebrated non-poetic line, on the influence of that decadent drink of drinks: 'Absinthe makes the tart grow fonder.' Quite.