

The Lost World

by [Ralph Berry](#) (July 2023)



The Wanderer (or Path Through the Trees), Paul Nash, 1911

The cancel culture is hardly new. It reared its head some time ago. A warning sign came in Christopher Ricks's edition of *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (1999). Ricks's anthology was universally praised, and rightly so. But there was one omission, startlingly provocative, that was passed over with little if any comment. No place was found for Rupert Brooke.

He was controversial at the time of his death, of blood poisoning on the way to the Dardanelles. He would surely have been finished there. But he had the enduring misfortune of being the wrong sort of poet, who did not live to write in another mode. The future belonged to Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, and all those for whom the Western Front was the all-consuming war. The early experience of war had been a Romantic exultation, and the poets who joined in were disowned. Brooke had written the most famous lines in the corpus of the war's poetry:

*'If I should die, think only this of me:
That's there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England.'*

These lines have given infinite solace to those bereaved in the wars. But Ricks excluded them from his canon of the acceptable without, I believe, offering any justification. Helen Gardner, the editor of the previous Oxford anthology, *The New Oxford Book of English Verse* (1972), who clearly shared the era's distaste for Brooke, had felt obliged to include 'If I should die.' She felt no compulsion to choose his most famous, still quoted poem 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester' (1912), written in Berlin:

*'I will pack, and take a train,
And get me to England once again!
For England's the one land, I know,
Where Men with Splended Hearts may go.'*

I quite see that the intellectuals who dominate the literary scene, then as now, may find 'The Old Vicarage' all too easy to mock (though it is still permissible to quote the final line, 'And is there honey still for tea?'). However, history had not finished with Brooke. The second world war brought out a vein of open patriotism and love for England that had long lain dormant. I would cite Dorothy L. Sayer's 1940 poem, 'Praise God now for an English war' as a remarkable evocation of national feeling that went well beyond the military disasters of that year more than that I would cite the films of the time.

They are not to be dismissed as 'propaganda.' Of course they were. But some of the finest British film-making came out of the 1940s and 1950s, especially by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. We can now see much of the era in Talking Pictures TV, devoted to old movies largely British and American. Of particular interest is *Pimpernel Smith*.

Set in the spring of 1939, the film was made in 1941. Its hero is Leslie Howard's Horatio Smith, Professsor of Archaeology at Cambridge who leads a group covertly devoted to freeing prisoners of concentration camps. Howard plays an archetypal English gentleman, a type no longer seen in film. Against him is the corpulent General von Graum, played by Frances L. Sullivan, a casting delight for audiences to savour. On his final rail journey to the border crossing point, Smith advises Mary Morris to travel on to England. He actually quotes Brooke, 'For England's the one land I know,/Where Men with Splendid Hearts may go.' You could say that in 1941. You can't in almost any subsequent year.

The final scene is a mesmerizing encounter between Smith and von Graum at the German side of the border crossing. Von Graum intends to shoot Smith in attempting to escape. The camera closes in on Smith, as he tells von Graum, 'Captain of Murderers,' that he is doomed. He distracts von Graum for a moment, and then makes his escape across the railway line and to freedom while von Graum is vainly shooting at emptiness. His final words command the screen: *I will be back. I will always be back.*

I cite *Pimpernel Smith* at some length because it records an era, a pre-Ricks era, when it was permissible to praise England as the temple of the nation's values. That temple has now been neglected to the point where it is only ripe for the developers' re-building projects. Already 'England' has been subsumed in 'Britain,' 'British,' –terms that offer nothing other than legality. Its history is constantly chiselled away by the wreckers for whom their version is the only one.

As the boatloads of migrants come in, all of them destined to become British, none of them to become English, a country to which they feel no allegiance, the 1940s remains in rear view. It is the world we have lost.

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