My Grandfather, A Modern Medievalist
The Life of the 8th Lord Howard de Walden

by Thomas Seymour
Family Tree

John Ellis (d.1706) = Martha (d.1698)

John Ellis (1675-1710) = Elizabeth Grace (d.1718),
  dau. of George Needham

George Ellis (1704-40) = Elizabeth (d.1746),
  dau. of Peter Bedchurch of Fonthill

George Ellis (1753-1815) = Susanna Charlotte,
  dau. of Samuel Long

John Ellis = Elizabeth (d.1782),
  dau. of John Palliser

Charles Rose Ellis 1st Baron Seaforth = Elizabeth Catherine Caroline Hervey
  (1771-1845) = lady of Sir John Hervey, (1655-1750/1)

William Henry Bentinck later Scott-Bentinck = Henrietta (1774-1844),
  finally Cavendish-Scott-Bentinck
  (1768-1854)

Frederick George Ellis 3rd Baron Seaforth, 7th Baron Howard de Walden (1799-1868)
  = Blanche (1835-1910),
  dau. of William Holden, m.1876

Reverend William Charles = Henrietta Elizabeth Ames
  (d.1915), dau. of Henry Metcalfe, m.1873

Evelyn Henry Ellis = Alberta Mary, (d.1942)
  dau. of General Hon Sir Arthur Edward Hardinge, m.1882

Other issue

Thomas Evelyn Ellis later Scott-Ellis 4th Baron Seaforth, = Marguerita Dorothy (1890-1974)
  8th Baron Howard de Walden (1880-1946) da. of Charles van Raalte, m.1812
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My grandfather, Tommy Scott-Ellis, 8th Baron Howard de Walden (1880–1946), was a phenomenon: as enigmatic as the Sphinx, as versatile as Proteus, as droll as any mythical beast to be found in a herald’s library – half-cat, half-goat, sprouting horns and wings with scaly appendages and a spiky tail.

An Englishman turned Welshman, he was polymath, poet and playwright, soldier and artist, Olympic sportsman, medievalist and pioneer. His early life was a roller-coaster ride: only child of a disastrous marriage, a ward of court following a bitter divorce; aged 19 he inherited a vast fortune, including great estates in Marylebone and Ayrshire. Basing himself at Seaford House, 37 Belgrave Square and Audley End, he launched himself into a bewildering range of pursuits and interests, touching or influencing the lives of many of the prominent figures of his time – Augustus John, Edward Gordon Craig, Harley Granville Baker, Thomas Beecham, Guglielmo Marconi, Captain Scott and (years later), Dylan Thomas. A generous and discerning patron, he was pre-eminent in his commitment to the British and Welsh performing arts, helping to craft new institutions in the wake of the First World War to promote drama, music and opera, and encourage native genius. His own artistic endeavours and sensibility and non-conformist spirit equipped him superbly for the role; as George Moore wrote of him ‘It is always the artist who helps art’.

Chirk Castle was taken on lease for 35 years (1911–46), and enjoyed a cultural renaissance under the auspices of Tommy and his wife Margherita van Raalte, a talented soprano with a passion for music and opera. A romantic medievalist – immortalised by Augustus John as the man who breakfasted reading The Times in a suit of armour – Tommy recreated the spirit of the early Middle Ages at Chirk and at Dean Castle, Kilmarnock, both magnificently restored during his tenure.

Yet he also had a modern, pioneering edge: he offered his Marylebone tenants 999-year leases: promoted early motorboats, motor traction, cinematography, radio and flying: supported contemporary art and theatre.

His crusade for Welsh theatre – his greatest pioneering experiment – harnessed his two deepest passions (Wales and drama). My favourite image of him comes from the 1933 Holyhead Eisteddfod where he put on Ibsen’s The Pretenders before an audience of 10,000. Standing offstage, probably a touch dishevelled and puffing his meerschaum pipe, he is beating the drums and turning the wind machines, cheerfully making things happen, yet never seeking the limelight.
In 1876 a bachelor of 46, in need of an heir, proposed to a girl aged just 20. Blanche Holden, a gentle, impoverished water-colour artist from Lancashire accepted, and found herself married to a gruff, wayward ex-soldier, Frederick Ellis, 7th Lord Howard de Walden. Four years later, on 9 May 1880, she gave birth to a boy, Thomas Evelyn, (‘Tommy’). Heir to a colossal fortune, his life was shaped by his father’s strange family history.

Ellises

The Ellises had been yeoman farmers in Denbighshire since time immemorial. In 1685 John Ellis, a Royalist captain from near Wrexham, emigrated to the new colony of Jamaica in search of fortune like his countryman Henry Morgan, but as planter, not pirate. Settling near Spanish Town, he established a sugar plantation, Ellis’s Caymanas, and a dynasty. His grandson George (1704–40) introduced guineagrass to the island, became Chief Justice and married Elizabeth Beckford, aunt of William Beckford of Fonthill. Two generations on, riding high on sugar, the Ellises settled in England, retaining their plantations. Charles Rose Ellis (1771–1845), George and Elizabeth’s grandson, was upwardly mobile. Eton-educated, MP for Seaford and close friend to George Canning, he married into the aristocracy, and was elevated to the peerage as 1st Baron Seaford.

Herveys and Howards

Elizabeth Hervey, Charles Rose’s bride, came from a notoriously eccentric family. Her grandfather, Frederick Hervey, was the flamboyant and licentious Earl of Bristol and Bishop of Derry. Dubbed ‘that wicked prelate’ by George III, he forced his priests to compete for preferment by a midnight run through Irish bogs. Tireless traveller from boudoir to refectory (Hotels Bristol everywhere are named after him), he was a prominent collector and patron of the arts, commissioning Soane and Flaxman to improve Ickworth, and building fine houses at Downhill and Ballyscullion. He inherited the ancient barony of Howard de Walden, granted by Elizabeth I to Thomas Howard (1561–1626), the 4th Duke of Norfolk’s second son, for gallantry against the Armada. The pedigree went back, through Howards and Mowbrays, to Edward I.
Bentincks and Scotts

The Ellises continued their upward march in the next generation. Charles Augustus (1799–1868), who inherited the barony as an infant on the Earl-Bishop's death, married Lady Lucy Cavendish-Bentinck and became British ambassador in Lisbon and Brussels. Daughter of the 4th Duke and Duchess of Portland (one of eight children), Lucy was renowned for her intellect, wit and originality. Her mother, the Duchess, born Henrietta Scott, had brought with her a vast Ayrshire estate – acquired by her father, General Scott of Balcomie, who was a phenomenally successful gambler – to add to the Duke's great estates at Welbeck and in Marylebone. Hermit-like and obsessive, the Duchess kept detailed inventories listing everything down to the last teaspoon. These characteristics recurred in the Bentinck boys (Lucy's brothers): Lord George was obsessive in his love of gambling and racing, and his hatred of Robert Peel and Corn Law reform. Lord John, later the 5th Duke, known as 'the Mole', became preoccupied with building underground tunnels; Lord Henry hid himself from public view.

Frederick (1830–99), the eldest of Lucy and Charles Augustus's ten children, named after the Earl-Bishop, was the heir to the Ellis plantations. Lucy never got on with her eldest boy. He and his father incurred enormous debts in struggling to preserve the plantations as the sugar trade declined. When Charles Augustus died, Frederick inherited an insolvent estate. Lucy undertook to discharge the liabilities in return for the plantations which she promptly gave to Evelyn, her youngest son. Frederick was outraged, feeling cheated of his inheritance. The rift between mother and son was never repaired.

Just as one great fortune vanished, another hove into view. Deprived of his Ellis inheritance, Frederick now had his eye on the Bentinck-Scott estates. The reclusive gene had yielded strange results: none of the Bentinck sons had married: the male line would die out on the Mole's death in 1879: only Lucy had children. Under the 4th Duke's will his Marylebone estate would pass – along with Henrietta's lands in Ayrshire – first to Lucy and her childless sisters for life, then to Lucy's senior grandson. Frederick and William Ellis, hitherto confirmed bachelors, now made haste to the altar. William married and had a son in 1875, but Frederick, as the elder brother 'trumped his bid'.

The arrival of Blanche as the 'new' Lady Howard de Walden, along with the baby boy, left Lucy, the Dowager, frigid with displeasure. For 20 years she lived on, England's richest woman, bountiful to charities, generous to her younger children, but there was to be no rapprochement with Frederick. Tommy would grow up receiving no affection from his Bentinck grandmother, only child of a failing marriage, in an atmosphere poisoned by hatred, wondering whether he had been conceived in love or in spite.

Frederick Hervey, the 4th Earl of Bristol and Bishop of Derry, by Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755–1842), 1790
Strange Inheritance: 1880–1901

‘There is no chronology in a young mind: things are important as incidents … Their value lies in a little vivid virtue …’

T.E. Ellis

Frederick and Blanche were ill-matched: she anxious, indolent, not overly bright, he sharp, cussed, impatient of folly, undomesticated as a badger. As the marriage fell apart, Blanche and Tommy moved from London to a modest house in Folkestone, while Frederick took lodgings in Eastbourne. Tommy had few luxuries as a child. Frederick first neglected, then refused to maintain his wife. Blanche and Tommy were poor by comparison with other families they knew. Tommy recalled this as a ‘great advantage’. It reinforced his determination to be generous with the fortune he inherited.

Tommy as a boy

Bowing to the Queen from his pram in Hyde Park, he fell, nose first, in the gravel. Tommy Ellis was a droll, quirkily imaginative child. In Folkestone with his French nanny, he imagined a blue man called ‘T’a vu’; when it haunted his dreams, he was whacked by her ‘large square hand like a frying pan’. Learning the alphabet, he chuckled over the ‘innate absurdity of the letter R’. In a drawing room humming with clocks, he watched his father make notes while rapping ‘the only clock that did not tick’ – a barometer.

Frederick, 7th Baron Howard de Walden, had the leisure to indulge in his obsessions – the weather, tandem bicycles, betting and his pedigree. ‘We quartered the arms of Plantagenet’, he boasted to Tommy one day, ‘you and I are of kingly descent’. Christened Thomas after the 1st Baron, Thomas Howard, builder of Audley End, the boy felt the weight of his father’s expectations, his duty to lead a life of honour and distinction; noblesse oblige. Frederick, however, proved a flawed role model:

‘A queer distorted man’, Tommy recalled his father, ‘with a face like Rodin’s Homme au Nez Cassé … hard-drinking, savage, bitter and foul-mouthed, proud as Lucifer in his warped way and yet a man … hating most things and people … with a pride that made him cling to his hate. In a sort of way, he liked me, though I fancy I disappointed him. I liked him as far as a small boy could like a soured and elderly man.’

Blanche, Lady Howard de Walden, by Edward Clifford (1844–1907)

‘The gentlest creature that ever lived’, so Tommy remembered his mother. Her health broken under marital stress, she would lie in bed, nursed by her sisters, over-protective of her son, prescribing rhubarb pills for minor ailments.

Tommy never knew his grandfather William Holden, who died young, though he relished the family’s descent from Alice Nutter, one of the Pendle witches hanged in 1612. Blanche’s mother, Julia (1831–1911), a feisty and loving grandmother to Tommy, came from interesting stock. Her Swiss-French father Etienne Paulet (1792–1850) had started as a silk merchant and contrabandiste in Marseilles, then set up business in Liverpool – ‘a fragment of the great Smuggler too strong even for Napoleon’, wrote Thomas Carlyle. Etienne’s wife Betsy Newton (1806–79), daughter of Robert Newton, the leading Methodist preacher of his day, reacted against her upbringing: a free spirit, she befriended the Carlyles, Emerson and Mazzini, wrote a triple-decker novel about the Risorgimento and was a talented and witty caricaturist.
Much of Tommy’s early life was spent on the fringes of the sea: Folkestone, Eastbourne, pre-prep school in Bournemouth and intermittent visits to Brownsea Island and its castle, home of a Bentinck cousin. His writings would hark back to the shore, the rhythm of the tides, gulls and wildfowl; islands, castles and boats would be recurring features of his life.

As an only child, he inhabited a world of make-believe and illusion. Books, ‘better than any human friend can be’, nourished his imagination, providing a passport into a nether world of sibling substitutes – knights and maidens, elves and fairies. Reticent and wary of commitment, he formed few close friendships in his youth: in compensation he developed a deep love of horses and an intuitive understanding of the animal kingdom.

Three years boarding at Cheam School under a fearsome headmaster coincided with a bitter final struggle between his parents. When Blanche applied for a decree of judicial separation on grounds of cruelty, Frederick countered by alleging adultery. At home with his father, the 12-year-old boy began to show a taste for adventure.

1892 (extract from Frederick’s diary)

15 Aug | About the house. Tommy upsetting everything in room.
22 Aug | Tommy tried aerial flight and fell into the river.
23 Aug | Tommy tried another aerial flight and fell upon a stone breaking his head ...

‘De Walden Divorce Suit’ – column from the New York Times, 3 March 1893
The trial caused a sensation in London society as shocking evidence emerged of Frederick’s brutish abuse of his wife. Blanche was vindicated and after a battle for custody, Tommy was made a ward of court. The Dowager undertook to provide support, but every penny had to be accounted for. Howard de Walden was disgraced, the escutcheon blotted. Traumatised and haunted by a brooding sense of ‘bad blood’ within his family, Tommy developed his own philosophy: ‘Know your native devil and you can laugh at him’.

In 1893 he was sent to Eton. The next five years wrought a transformation. Sturdily built, he became a keenly competitive sportsman, boxing, shooting, fencing and swimming. Original, with a first-rate intelligence, prodigious memory and ready humour, said his reports, though sometimes careless, often untidy and absent-minded. Interests burgeoned, ancient and modern. Mechanics and motors fascinated him; his uncle, Evelyn Ellis, brought the first car, a Panchard Levesseur, into the country. He admired Elizabethan poetry and drama, but loved above all to immerse himself in the early Middle Ages, with a scholar’s eye and a romantic yearning to recreate its chivalric spirit and traditions. Blanche, receiving his letters garnished with comic sketches, saw a budding artist, while Frederick encouraged his enjoyment of live entertainment – circus, pantomime and the theatre with Irving and Terry in their heyday.

Leaving Eton (1898), he passed into Sandhurst, joined the 10th Royal Prince of Wales Hussars and took to military life with gusto. In July 1899 the Dowager died. Frederick followed her to the grave four months later. Tommy recalled their final meeting with awe: ‘he never softened to the last … that grim fierce old man dying without a friend in a Nursing Home.’

With war imminent, he embarked for South Africa, joining his regiment in Cape Town along with his trusty chargers, Bucephalus and Brown Windsor. As war took its toll, youthful exuberance gave way to disenchantment: ‘All the accounts of success here are lies from beginning to end as French [the British commander] sends them himself’ (13 January 1900).

He shaved his head, grew whiskers and took refuge in drawings and verse (‘How I destroyed the Boers’). After two gruelling years in the veldt, the great ride to Kimberley and Lord Roberts’ victory at Paardenberg, he succumbed to malaria, ‘becoming like a smoked orange’, and was invalided home. Now began the most scintillating phase of his life.
A Pioneering Spirit: 1901–14

‘It is always the artist that helps art.’

George Moore, in reference to Lord Howard de Walden: Epistle to the Cymry, Confessions of a Young Man (19 Ed.)

Stretching north from Oxford Street as far as Primrose Hill, the Marylebone estate made Tommy one of the richest men in the realm. First things first: at Basset Lowke, the Holborn toyshop, he bought all the model boats, engines and soldiers he had longed for as a boy. Then he had a model theatre installed in the London Library, with proscenium lighting, footlights and movable wings. ‘Thank God’, he recalled later, ‘that I have never put away childish things’.

Next, he established himself and his mother in fashionable Belgravia, taking a lease of Sefton House, 37 Belgrave Square, and renaming it Seaford House. On a trip to South America, he bought an onyx mine, had 42 tons shipped home and transformed his new abode into a palace, complete with entrance hall, double staircase and gallery encased in pale green.

Dean Castle

In Ayrshire, farmers, tenants and aldermen of Kilmarnock welcomed the new landlord as a ‘lad of pairts’. Dean Castle appealed to his love of the medieval and he initiated a long-term programme to restore the castle and keep. Assisted by Felix Joubert, he acquired a magnificent collection of arms and armour, principally European of the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries, to be housed there. In recognition of his Scottish inheritance, he changed his name to Ellis-Scott, later reversing it to Scott-Ellis.

In 1904 Audley End fell vacant on Lord Braybrooke’s death. Seizing the moment, Tommy took a lease, stepping back into his Howard ancestors’ shoes; Frederick would have expected no less.

This Elizabethan phase was self-consciously theatrical. A portrait by the American artist Robert Sauber shows him in cloak, black tights and trunk hose slashed with apricot satin.

Some spoke of a resemblance to Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1511–47), Thomas Howard’s grandfather, the first English poet to write blank verse; but inspiration for Tommy’s writings came from a different source.

Underneath his equable exterior, powerful forces were at work. The insecurities of his childhood made him yearn for a part of the land which felt like home. In Denbighshire lay his Ellis roots. Little by little the romantic notion of a homecoming, two centuries after Captain Ellis’s exodus, took hold of
his mind. His name had an unmistakably Welsh resonance. Thomas Edward Ellis (1859–99) had been the star of the Liberal firmament and much-loved leader of the Welsh Home Rule Movement. T.E. Ellis, Tommy's nom de plume, would strike a chord in the Principality. In the dawn of the Gothic Revival his forbear George Ellis (1753–1815), friend of Sir Walter Scott and Voltaire, had explored the Cambrian migrations of the ancient Britons in his *Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances*. It was time, believed Tommy, to cast off the dry models of Greek and Rome and rediscover the virtues and vigour of the ancient Britons. Reading Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of the *Mabinogion* fired his interest in the Celtic legends. Boats, yachts, steamships, children would be assigned Cymric names.

Building on his studies as a child, he developed a legion of interests and pursuits. Prominent among them were motor engineering and aviation, radio and film, horseracing, sailing, archery, falconry, fencing and boxing, horsemanship and heraldry, history and genealogy, drama and stagecraft, music and literature, painting and sculpture. 'The most versatile man of his age', *The Daily Mirror* reported. Tommy saw it differently. 'Concentration is a form of narrow-mindedness … I have left the narrow path somewhere and I cannot find where I turned off'. His inheritance intensified his desire to prove himself: 'the heavy pressure of my belongings made me crave some form of attainment … of myself only'.

**New inventions**

Experiments in aerial flight had moved on apace since Tommy's exploits on the river bank. In 1903 he commissioned Hans Knudsen to design and build a 'flying machine', *Fer de Lance*, near Newmarket. It was a splendid failure, its silken wings providing shirts for his growing band of godchildren.

Marine endeavours proved more fruitful. Promoting the best British firms to construct boats with engines equipped for marine propulsion, he acquired a succession of motorboats which led the way in British International Cup races, achieving record times with *Napier II* in 1905 (25.75 knots) and *Daimler II* in 1907. An experienced navigator, he often took the helm of a companion to his principal boat steered by the professional Captain Fentiman. *Dylan* was one of three competitors in the one and only Olympic powerboat race, held on Southampton Water in 1908, aborted due to stormy weather.

Motor interests found another outlet in his friendship with Captain Scott. When Scott opted for motor traction for his Antarctica Expedition, Tommy financed the development of the sledges, closely following the work of Skelton, the engineer, and attending trials in Finchley, Paris and Switzerland. Scott wrote from Antarctica describing how the sledges had been 'sailing over the snow' before they overheated. Tommy shared Scott's belief that there was a great future for tracked vehicles. This was ironically prescient: for despite their limitations, or misuse, in Antarctica, they were the forerunners of the tanks which helped defeat the German armies in 1917.
An interest in early radio was stimulated by his friendship with Guglielmo Marconi. Tommy had heard Brownsea Island was for sale, and tried to buy it, only to discover that the purchasers, Charles and Florence Van Raalte, were friends of his mother. Every summer he paid a visit, mooring his yacht in the bay, warming to the three high-spirited Van Raalte children, and sharing the family’s passions for music, sailing, early motor cars and new inventions. Marconi, whose yacht *Elettra* was moored alongside, knew the Van Raalte well, and met his wife Beatrice through the family. When Marconi gave the Van Raalte children primitive radio contraptions for Christmas, Tommy helped set them up. The inventor would often come over to Audley End from his factory at Chelmsford to discuss the latest developments in wireless telegraphy. The ultimate beneficiary of this relationship would prove to be the British army.

**Sporting interests**

Acquiring a racing stable, Tommy chose the apricot colours, on Augustus John’s advice, to set off the green of the turf. He had immediate success with Zinfandel, winning the Gordon Stakes (1903), the Jockey Club Stakes and Coronation Cup (1904) and the Ascot Gold Cup (1905). For upwards of thirty years he cut a distinctive figure on the racecourse, sporting monocle and meerschaum, boater and binoculars, chin thrust out and head tilted back. Breeding horses interested him more than racing; on one occasion he was found with his nose in a book, oblivious that his horse had just won the race of the day.

An ambidextrous fencer, he performed with distinction at foil, sabre and epee. Sixth man in the fencing team led by Lord Desborough for the 1906 Olympics, he escorted the team out to Athens in *Branwen*, his new yacht. *The Cruise of the Branwen*, Theodore Cook’s account of the adventure, is a minor classic, enlivened by Tommy’s miniature drawings with mock-heroic captions. It reveals how the 1908 Olympics came to London; Vesuvius had erupted causing Italy, the host nation, to pull out; discussions on board *Branwen* and a word from Lord Desborough in the ear of Edward VII sealed the deal.
Society

Nonconformist by nature, Tommy never felt part of ‘The Establishment’. He had a visceral dislike of politicians, distrusted businessmen and abhorred ‘that majestic monstrosity the English law’. Staying at Windsor in 1908, he wrote, ‘Little do they know the philosophic anarchist is in their midst’. Unclubbable, he led a simple daily life at Seaford House: late breakfast in grey flannels and leather slippers, seeing his secretary, fencing, lunch, a walk in a jacket buttoned too high, a too small bowler hat, stick and gloves: tea and reading: dinner and writing; bed at 2am. If he sought society he might join the writers and artists who frequented the Café Royale or saunter down to the Crabtree Club, the rackety Greek Street outfit run with his support by Augustus John.

Painting and sculpture

Opening an art exhibition in 1902, he criticised those who think that, ‘since Art is not nature, everything unnatural is artistic’, and joked that he could not admire ‘pictures of three cornered ... impossible females, painted a delicate mauve’. As patron of the New English Art Club and founder-member of the Contemporary Art Society started by his cousin Ottoline Morrell, he began to promote a wide range of artists, whilst trying his hand across the spectrum – humorous illustrations, landscapes and, later on, portraits.
Bust of Lord Howard de Walden, by Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), c. 1905–6

Literature and music

Tommy admired and was befriended by many of the eminent writers of the day: George Moore, W.B. Yeats, G.K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, and GeorgeBernard Shaw. He gave generous and unstinting support to them and their causes. Moore, a frequent guest at Seaford House, had a fertile mind and Tommy relished their discussions, often joined by Maud Burke, Lady Cunard, a brilliant conversationalist and wit. Encouraged by these two, he wrote his first play – *Lanval*, an Arthurian romance. Performed at the Aldwych in 1908, it was his first play – launched an Arthurian tradition, and Rodin’s Howard de Walden is a striking character study, suggestive of profound inner reflection and quiet reserve.

He wrote of his work in which Punch claimed to detect Rodin’s guiding hand.
Jones for Irving's 1895 production of *King Arthur*. 'An achievement of which Lord Howard de Walden may be proud' noted *The Era*.

His next two projects were splendidly ambitious. First, he began work on a dramatic trilogy set in seventh-century Byzantium. This was laid to one side when he hatched the idea of reworking the *Mabinogion* legends as a verse drama – *The Cauldron of Annwn* – in three parts: *The Children of Don, Dylan, Son of the Wave and Bronwen*. In 1907, he had a change of plan. Introduced to Josef Holbrooke, a young composer of dazzling virtuosity, he was convinced that he had met the finest English musician since Purcell. Instead of playwright, he would be librettist; Ellis and Holbrooke would fashion the legends into a grand new British opera in the Wagnerian manner. So began a lifelong collaboration in which Holbrooke set many Ellis poems to music, including *The Song of Gwyn ap Nudd* to his first piano concerto. This unusual pair, the lean, loquacious, argumentative composer known as 'the Cockney Wagner' and the erudite, retiring, equable peer were joined by Sidney Sime, an artist with a predilection for fantasy and the bizarre, commissioned by Tommy to design the sets. The three men shared a taste for mystery and the occult, ranging from Gothic literature to the esoteric philosophies.

Aeolian Organs were all the rage at the start of the century. Tommy had one installed at Audley End, where he played to entertain his regiment. Here, and later at Chirk, he enjoyed orchestrating music ranging from Bach to Macdowell, to recreate the original effects. A stalwart supporter of the new London Symphony Orchestra, he backed Thomas Beecham's diverse musical adventures. With Holbrooke's encouragement he began promoting the work of British composers – a campaign he would pursue tenaciously during the inter-war years.

**Theatre**

Tommy's serious contribution to repertory theatre began in 1909, when he collaborated with Herbert Trench, taking a lease of the Haymarket Theatre. A memorable production of *King Lear* was followed by the first run of Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird* (1909–11). Malcolm Campbell was so entranced by the symbolist fairy play with Sidney Sime's bewitching sets that he painted his car blue and christened her *Bluebird. The Pretenders*, an early Ibsen play about disputed succession to the Norwegian throne, was first staged in Britain at the Haymarket in 1913. Intrigued by its study of confidence and self-doubt in the two leading characters, Tommy regarded it as Ibsen's finest work. During the same period he played an influential role in the careers of the two outstanding innovators of early twentieth-century theatre, Edward Gordon Craig and Harley Granville Barker. Craig had returned to London in 1911 after several years' self-imposed exile and was urgently seeking funds for a new overseas venture. His efforts bore no fruit until Tommy agreed to provide £5,000, enabling Craig to open and run his experimental school at the Arena Goldoni, Florence. Within a short space of time it drew admiration from across Europe. Although war brought an end to the enterprise, Tommy would ensure that Craig's achievements came to be recognised in Britain.

After Barker's inspiring spell as director of the Court Theatre (1904–7), Tommy was keen to re-establish him and his wife Lillah McCarthy in repertory theatre. Barker declined an offer to direct at the Haymarket in 1909, but with Tommy's support he took leases, first of the Little Theatre (1911), then the Kingsway and St James's Theatres (1912–13), where he staged plays by Euripides, Ibsen, Bennett, Shaw and Schnitzler whilst setting to work on his Shakespeare series at *The Savoy – The Winter's Tale, Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Shakespeare's work, Tommy maintained, should be accessible to all, not the preserve of scholars. In a magisterial lecture on *The Chronicle Plays* (1911) he maintained that 'Everyone should be induced to read Shakespeare and forbidden to talk about him', caustically describing German critics obsessed with textual minutiae as Lilliputians 'dancing on the diaphragm' of the colossus. Collaborating with Acton Bond, he organised Shakespeare reading evenings and had pocket volumes produced to enable each play to be read inside an hour. Hamlet's best known soliloquy, he suggested, should be cut in its entirety.

**Security for tenants**

Having gained a modest reputation as an enlightened landlord, Tommy found himself enmeshed in a protracted struggle with John Lewis. The elderly draper wanted to open a shop window at the edge of Cavendish Square contrary to the terms of his lease. Lewis repeatedly broke his covenants, refused to compromise, and used his eventual committal to prison for contempt of court to campaign as a martyr for leasehold reform. He then erected defamatory placards about his 'wicked' landlord, goading Tommy to sue for libel so that he could air his grievances before a jury. Though vindicated in court, Tommy was hurt by the attack on his honour and the jury's award of a farthing damages. In a far-sighted response, he established a scheme offering his Marylebone tenants 'virtual enfranchisement', the right to buy a 999-year lease, and provided loans on favourable terms. This proved highly popular and was taken up by many of his tenants ranging from Lewis to H.H. Asquith. No other urban landlord followed the initiative. Decades would elapse before Parliament afforded leaseholders any comparable protection.
Aged 30, Tommy felt in need of a change of direction. At Audley End he was haunted by a black dog which cavorted round the billiard table and jumped through the wall past startled guests. So he found an island (Eilean Shona in Loch Moidart), then a castle. In the summer of 1910 he made his first visit to North Wales, motoring with Holbrooke in search of their heroes' graves and shrines. Passing through Betws-y-coed and Harlech he fell in love with the landscape. Then he saw an advertisement to let Chirk Castle, Roger Mortimer's rugged fortress on the Denbighshire border, home for centuries to the Myddelton family. Taking a lease (25 years, later extended to 35), he sealed his relationship with Wales and set about a major restoration programme, his third in a decade. Close to the heartlands of his Ellis forbears, he felt he had come home.

Meanwhile, his friendship with Margherita, the eldest Van Raalte child, had blossomed. Trained as an opera singer in Paris, she shared Tommy's love of Wagner, joining his circle of friends at Bayreuth and dressing up as Brunnhilda to sing on the moonlit shores of Brownsea. Their engagement (29 December 1911) and marriage (February 1912) attracted extraordinary public interest. The Daily Mirror devoted two front pages to the engagement alone. The twins, John Osmail and Bronwen, born in November 1912, became a popular subject for pavement artists.

No such popular acclaim greeted Tommy's artistic offspring, The Children of Don, performed at the London Opera House on 28 June 1912. The Times found the work 'quite unintelligible', whilst The Era thundered, 'If English opera in English is to be a success, it must not be founded on German methods'. John Middleton Murry damned the music whilst praising the librettist's Homeric vigour: 'Lord Howard de Walden' he wrote 'may yet give us a great epic'.
The move to Chirk coincided with a flamboyant artistic vie de bohème in North Wales. Augustus John and John Dickson Innes – sometimes joined by Derwent Lees, a semi-deranged, one-legged Australian artist – were roaming across Snowdonia, painting Arenig Fawr and the surrounding landscape spontaneously from different angles and in changing colours as the sunlight moved across the mountains. Tommy supported Innes and accompanied him on a painting tour of Spain in May 1912. Derwent Lees was put up at Chirk, where he attached himself to Margot, sketching her and insisting that she accompany him on walks wearing white gloves. Meanwhile Tommy took a bungalow in the hills near Harlech for the use of John, Holbrooke and Sime. Holbrooke installed a piano, John imported a model. Wild carouses and whirlwind motor excursions in pursuit of Welsh whisky would find the three men in a heap at the gates of Chirk in the early hours of the morning. Meanwhile the castle opened its gates to a diverse stream of visitors: Tommy’s fishing friends, Margot’s favourite singers, Joubert, Leopold of Battenberg, Epstein, Marconi, Diana Manners, and Shaw and Barker, enthused by Tommy’s Welsh theatre venture.

Tommy and Margherita’s engagement hit the headlines in *The Daily Mirror*, 29 December 1911

A good day’s fishing on the River Dee, April 1913; Tommy left, Harry Morritt, right
The Welsh National Theatre Movement

Inspired by the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and encouraged by Moore and Yeats, Tommy decided to promote Welsh theatre. In Epistle to the Cymru, Moore recalled how they discussed Goethe’s insight that ‘the best way to interest a people in a language is through the theatre’. The Irish Theatre Movement had come too late to save the language; Tommy was concerned to preserve Welsh as a living language as well as promoting drama for its own sake. But entrenched opposition from Calvinists and the chapel movement would have to be overcome.

In 1911 he started a competition, offering an annual prize of £100 for a new or original play dealing with ‘things Welsh’. When Change, J.O. Francis’s play about life in the industrial valleys of South Wales, won the prize in 1912, Tommy financed its production at the Haymarket and then in America. In South Wales however, it proved difficult to find theatres willing to perform it. So, early in 1914, he formed the Welsh National Drama Company to perform prize-winning plays on tour. Opening week at the New Theatre Cardiff, 11–16 May, generated great excitement. Moore made a speech proclaiming that Goethe’s idea had ‘come to birth in Wales’; Ephraim Harris by D.T. Davies (a 1914 prize-winner) was performed on the Tuesday night and was the first Welsh play acted in Welsh by professional actors in a regular theatre. On Friday hundreds lined the streets to greet Lloyd George, who had come down by train to see the evening’s performance. A triple bill, it concluded with Pont Orewyn, Tommy’s new one-act play about the death of Prince Llewellyn. In an avant-garde flourish, he had a motion-picture taken of birds on the Bass Rock and provided overhead projection showing storm birds gathering round Llewellyn’s guards. Lloyd George took the stage at the end to predict that drama would become a prime aspect of Welsh culture. As the company went on its southern tour, Shaw wrote eloquently supporting the Movement, prophesying that the next Shakespeare or Goethe might be born in Wales and urging the Welsh not to strangle drama at birth. Heartened by the reception in Swansea, where Barker added his voice in support, the company took a summer break, whilst a new moveable theatre was being assembled in preparation for the tour of North Wales. It never happened. Weeks later the National Drama project lay in ruins, dismembered by the European war.

Dylan: cowboys: war

Performed on 4 July 1914 at Drury Lane, Dylan, Son of the Wave was on a grand scale, with Beecham conducting a vast orchestra, including an organ, four saxophones and four saxhorns, tubaphones and a bass flute. The chorus of wildfowl was shown projected onto a huge screen behind the actors – the first instance of cinematography on the London stage. In spite of all this, it was a resounding flop, dashing Tommy’s hopes. From this time on, although he never gave up writing, promoting the arts increasingly became his prime objective.

By a strange twist, the opera played its part in the making of a new Welsh genius whom Tommy would help in years to come. David John Thomas, senior English master at Swansea Grammar School, was a keen supporter of the Welsh theatre movement and familiar with the opera. When his son was born on 27 October 1914, he had him christened with a poetic name – Dylan.
**Battle Music: 1914–18**

As much soldier as artist, Tommy cherished the army’s inculcation of old-fashioned masculine virtues. Joining the Westminster Dragoons in 1902, he supported it at every level, purchasing the regimental headquarters, supplying new swords, sponsoring events, entertaining the troops for weekends at Audley End, even presenting a couple of Hillman Scout cars of his own design; but his outstanding contribution was his gift in 1910 of two Marconi Wireless Cavalry Pack sets, each comprising four pack-saddle loads. The British army had only one set at the time; radio was still a little-known form of communication. Intensive training by the regiment produced two efficient stations, installed at Sinai and Ismailia in November 1914, later reinforced by seven further Westminster Dragoons stations east of Suez which played a significant role in Lawrence of Arabia’s campaign.

When war broke out, Tommy handed over his new yacht to the navy, his horses to the army and set sail for Egypt as Second-in-Command of the Dragoons. Joining him in Cairo after their next child, Elizabeth, was born, Margot rented a large house outside Alexandria and intrepidly set up and ran a convalescent hospital staffed with nurses from England. Though his eyesight precluded combat service, Tommy was desperate to get to the frontline and secured a transfer to Gallipoli.

A letter from Tommy to his son John, 1915
On 5 May 1915, he sent John a picture of Egypt, the sea and a big ship carrying Mummy home to visit him: ‘I hope you will be a big strong boy when I come home. Your loving Dad’. Serving as Landing Officer at Lemnos and at Suvla Bay the myopic major became a familiar figure traversing the beaches with no concern for personal safety. As the campaign foundered, he set down his thoughts about the nation-state and its future:

The very fact that a state must have a government and [it] must act on certain principles which cover a vast diversity of occasions and complexities makes injustice a certainty in a ratio increasing rapidly with every extension of power … if we find it hard to supply principles of justice to single individuals, what manner of result can be expected from laws which operate upon millions. We are always trying to organise from the top. I see our British faults in front of me here every day.

Britain he now perceived as ‘one of a very loose confederacy of small states, some of which may in time break away.’

One of the last evacuation staff to leave, he returned to Margot in Cairo where Pip (Priscilla Essylt) their fourth child was conceived. After rejoining his regiment in the western desert at El Dabaa – ‘all amongst the camels and dust flies’, as he wrote to John – he transferred in November 1916 to the Western Front, as second-in-command of the 9th Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers.

Happy to be among Welsh comrades, he looked for ways to boost their morale. First he had a set of band instruments and music sent out. He wrote to Margot:

The Band came out and played to us yesterday. They can manage a few marches now. Please tell Rudall Carte and Co that both the Bb Clarinets have split and to send replacements pronto.

Then, with a touch of medieval romance, he issued the troops with a knife supposedly modelled on a cledd distributed to Welsh archers at Crécy. Designed and patented by Joubert, the knife was inscribed Dros Urddas Cymru – ‘for the honour of Wales’ – and engraved with decorative motifs reminiscent of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. It certainly saw action. On 5 June 1917, as German trenches were raided in the build-up to the battle of Messines, the Lewis gunners were recorded as ‘carrying the strange knives furnished by Lord Howard de Walden’.

His letters home were jaunty, stiff upper-lip: ‘considerable exhibition of fireworks the other night … Fritz came over and paid a short visit to some neighbours further south … one determined nightingale sang firmly throughout’; but in his private notes, made for his son should he die, he unbuttoned himself, explaining his heartfelt love for his new homeland and its people:

I have felt something always drawing me towards this people. It may be the passion I have always felt for the Mabinogion or, perhaps, the stirring of some far away Cymric ancestor or just the chance that I was a lonely and homeless Ishmael with a great desire to have some plot or patch of the world with whose interests I could identify myself. Indeed, I have longed like a woman to be possessed by some region or tract.

I often walk in imagination as it is up the hill behind Chirk, round through the Warren and down to Tynant … And often, too, I go and sit beside the little pool of the Ceiriog under the Gelli wood.

I think I can understand now the wandering spirit coming back often to follow the paths it loved in life. I am sitting now in my room in Adams Tower looking up the valley and the wind is driving the wet leaves against the panes and the fierce wind all warm and misty is booming up through those wonderful tall oaks straight from the Berwyns.

Back home after the Armistice, he was ‘like most men recently back from the trenches’, Margot recalled, ‘taciturn, obviously unhappy, suffering from shock.’ Chirk had borne its full share of casualties, many from families the Howard de Waldens knew or employed. Tommy commissioned Gill to construct a war memorial. It stands in the village: soldier in greatcoat and helmet, bent over a rifle, an elegant tribute to the fallen.
The Arts faced something of a crisis in the inter-war years. Heavy taxation and economic depression accelerated the decline in private patronage, yet arts institutions received no government funding until the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (precursor of the Arts Council) was established in 1940. New, distinctively British leagues and societies were set up to promote native talent, but funds, tenacity and vision were required to keep these and existing institutions afloat. In these intensely difficult times Tommy came to the fore as a generous, discerning and influential patron, pre-eminent in his championship of the performing and visual arts.

**Drama**

In 1919 Geoffrey Whitworth, inspired by seeing munition workers doing wartime play readings, founded the British Drama League, with Howard de Walden as president and Barker as chairman. The League ran drama schools, established a library and pressed for a national theatre. This was the heyday of amateur drama; by 1923 the League had 360 local affiliated societies. The revival of the one-act play can be traced directly to the League’s experimental festival of 1926. The spirit of the League lives on through the All-England Theatre Festival, which holds an amateur drama contest every year, awarding the Howard de Walden ewer for the best one-act play.

In 1922 a major international theatre exhibition was held in Amsterdam, displaying models and designs, masks and marionettes, etchings and woodcuts culled from productions in Europe and America. Craig’s work was given place of honour. As President of the League, Tommy initiated and led the movement to have the exhibition transferred to London. It was displayed that summer at the Victoria & Albert Museum, accompanied by a prestigious lecture series. For the first time the British public was properly made aware of the revolutionary changes taking place in theatrical production. As Craig put it: ‘We began to build our theatres differently, we set our stages with different scenes, and we acted our old and new plays differently’.

In his personal capacity Tommy strongly supported new and experimental ventures such as the Birmingham Repertory Theatre founded by his friend Barry Jackson, and the Cambridge Festival Theatre run by the radical Terence Gray (1926–33). He always favoured a rebel spirit. When Lewis Casson made a vituperative attack on the theatrical establishment at a Drama League dinner, Tommy took him aside and offered his congratulations along with £1,000 to take the Holborn Empire for the following season.

**British opera**

The Beecham Opera Company, founded in 1916 as a permanent touring company, had fallen heavily into debt. A major rescue operation mounted by Lady Cunard, Tommy and the Aga Khan enabled a phoenix venture to be set up in 1919, but within a year Beecham’s fresh commitments made it unsustainable and liquidators were appointed. The vacuum was filled, with Tommy’s backing and continuing support, by the formation of the British National Opera Company. During its seven-year life, starting with *Aida* in Bradford (6 February 1922,) and ending with *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* in Golders Green (16 April 1929), a new generation of British singers and conductors started their careers. Its London seasons featured stars such as Nellie Melba and Maggie Teyte: *Hansel and Gretel* starring Teyte at Covent Garden (1923) was the first complete opera broadcast in Europe. The company toured the provinces performing contemporary British operas by Holst and Vaughan Williams.

**British music**

Britain, long derided in Germany as ‘*Das Land ohne Musik*’, needed to promote her own composers. This was one of the objectives of the British Music Society (BMS) founded by Eaglefield Hull in 1918. Not only its president and principal funder, Tommy was its tireless advocate throughout its 15-year existence, travelling the country to speak at meetings and arranging to have composers’ works published and performed. In 1920 the BMS’s First National Congress, inaugurated at Seaford House, was celebrated with six dazzling concerts, including the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO) under Albert Coates at Queen’s Hall playing Elgar’s *In the South* and Vaughan Williams’s *London Symphony*.

A major supporter of the LSO since its earliest days, Tommy became its honorary president in 1920. Consistent with his championship of British music, he made his funding conditional upon the LSO including British composers’ works in its concert programmes. Within Wales he offered prizes to build up woodwind in local orchestras. Believing in the power of music to raise morale, he funded a special LSO tour of the Welsh valleys during the Depression.

Gervais Elwes, the acclaimed tenor, was one of Tommy and Margot’s favourite singers. On his untimely death in 1921, the Musicians Benevolent Fund was founded and Tommy became its president. Alive to the financial needs of struggling musicians, he was its prime supporter at a time when the rapidly growing number of professionals aspiring to earn a living presented a constant challenge. Today the Fund spends £2m a year helping 1,500 people.
Seaford House

Throughout these years Seaford House served as the venue for countless parties to benefit the arts or charities supported by the Howard de Waldens. ‘A veritable palace’ recalled Marion Wright of the BMS ‘where marble, gold, old tapestries, armour and all the glamour of wealth and art are combined into a whole of exquisite taste’. The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra would be invited to play, poets to recite, in order to raise funds for Queen Charlotte’s Hospital, as well as for private parties. The Drama League, BMS and LSO were lavishly entertained, as was the cast of the Comédie Française. When Toscanini came to London, Tommy invited him to bring his entire orchestra to dinner: ‘after all’ he observed ‘they do most of the work’.

Here you might experience Feodor Chaliapin in full voice, Shaw holding forth on how he would have written The Ring, ballerinas such as Tamara Karsavina and Alicia Markova, Violet Woodhouse on the harpsichord or Louis Fleury on the flute. The rich variety of entertainment was matched only by the diversity of guests, ranging from George Gershwin (‘exciting to dance with’ recalled Margot ‘as he liked to change the rhythm’) to Tommy’s friend Georges Carpentier, the light heavyweight boxer.

Admiring a wide range of British contemporary artists – Walter Sickert, Philip Wilson Steer, John Lavery, Ambrose McEvoy, Frank Brangwyn and Dudley Hardy – Tommy bought their works for the New English Art Club and the Contemporary Art Society (of which he became president). In 1927 he and an Australian artist W. Howard Robinson founded the British Empire Academy with an object perhaps more benevolent than practical: ‘to promote aid and unite all the Arts throughout the Empire.’ Late in the 1930s he helped Augustus John set up a Contemporary Art Society for Wales, and was appointed a trustee of the Tate Gallery. Whilst toiling away with landscapes at Chirk (‘a water colour is nearly always a fluke’ Steer warned him), he acquired a studio in Chelsea, took lessons and began to paint portraits and nudes; one child recalled seeing him paint a blonde Titian-like beauty in a green dress, another a piebald nude.

Foreign ventures

The imperial mission was drummed into the heads of Victorian schoolboys. Tommy was no exception: an essay at Eton described the ‘Greater Britain’ to be created in the ‘Great African Continent’. After an early venture with a zebra stud farm near Lake Victoria, he found his interest reignited by an East African safari with Margot in 1920. Collaborating with Ewart ‘Lioneye’ Grogan (first man to walk from Cairo to the Cape), he invested in Kenya and Tanganyika, acquiring newspapers and businesses in Nairobi along with virgin forest which he had cleared for use as farmland. The best farm lay on the lava-rich slopes of Mount Elgon. Maize, wheat and coffee were grown, oxen worked on the grand scale (16 to a plough) and English bulls were imported to improve the breed of cattle. Tommy was also an enthusiastic botanist and member of the Royal Zoological Society. In 1930 he led an expedition into Uganda and the Congo in 1930, returning with a precious collection of botanical and zoological specimens which he presented to the Natural History Museum.

In 1935 a fresh interest developed when he acquired the South American Saint Line, which ran a passenger and cargo service from Antwerp to Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina. As its chairman he took a special interest in navigation. A keen builder of working models, he even made occasional contributions to the design of new vessels.
Helmet and feet of suit of armour

The tenant of Chirk

The mid-Victorian makeover of Chirk's East Wing by Augustus Pugin, replete with heraldic designs and dark oak panelling, seems to anticipate the advent of a knight from the Middle Ages. Now he had arrived. Tommy filled the Long Gallery with suits of armour. Augustus John was bemused to find his host at breakfast 'clad, cap-a-pie, in a suit of ancient armour and reading his newspaper.' It was, in fact, a brand-new suit made to his measurements by Joubert, enabling Tommy to demonstrate that a man in properly fitted armour could move easily and quickly. The armour came in handy for three historical pageants at Harlech Castle which he helped arrange and fund. In the week-long pageant of 1920 he played the Earl of Plymouth, Margot was Queen Margaret of Anjou with the twins in attendance, whilst Bob the falconer showed off the hawks to the crowds. The Eisteddfod had a more primitive ritual. Honoured as Green Bards, the Howard de Waldens took part in its annual bardic procession, clad in long robes and wreathed with oak leaves.

Six children, with the arrival of Gaenor (1919) and Rosemary (1922), ensured an abundance of noise, laughter and music. Tommy describes the little family orchestra, writing to Holbrooke in 1928:

'Pa Clarinet
Mummy Voice on 1st Violin
Bronwen Viola or Flute
John Cello
Elizabeth Cello (Hot Stuff this one)
Essylt (2nd Violin (Good when she wants to be)
The other two … thirsting to begin'

In his new role as paterfamilias, Tommy arranged fencing lessons and children's pageants and devised quirky quizzes with questions such as 'Name the shortest route from Quito to Irkutsk' or 'Explain the growth of whiskers in rural deans'. Nothing gave more delight than his series of six Christmas pantomimes (1923–30). Margot recalled how the King's Bedroom served as Green Room 'full of muted chatter, grease paint, dresses and argument'. In The Reluctant Dragon John played St George and Tommy the soft-hearted dragon in a green scale suit.

The Sleeping Beauty is a Shakespearean spoof in blank verse, Puss and Brutes an American detective imbroglio, while Jack and the Beanstalk, closing the series, features a tragicomic Ogre, McTavish, a dodgy German commercial traveller and William, a clairvoyant wireless set.

Chirk's austere surroundings were transformed: a magnificent herbaceous border was created by Norah Lindsay; a park set aside for deer with Eland antelope from Africa; stables provided for thoroughbred mares and foals, Welsh ponies cross-bred with an Arab stallion. Hawking was a special interest. Rosemary recalls days on the moor across the valley, watching her father's peregrine falcons swooping down on their prey.

Tommy's way of life depended on a loyal and enthusiastic team, as much companions as employees: Bradd and Bob Slightham the falconers, Fennel in charge of the ponies; Parry the gillie, helping Tommy and his friend Morriss land salmon from the Dee. Harper, the butler, was his regular golfing partner, Albert Unwin, house carpenter, his friend from Audley End days. Without Dean, his valet, Tommy could scarcely manage; on a voyage Margot found him trying to shunt his laundry through a porthole.
The Howard de Walden family at Chirk Castle, by Sir John Lavery (1856–1941), c.1932–3

In her memoirs, Margot describes John Lavery’s painting of her family in the Saloon:

The sun is shining in onto a Chinese rug and the enormous glass bowl of gladioli; one of the Coromandel screens shows behind the grand piano where Bronwen is playing the viola, Elizabeth the ’cello and my head is seen at the piano. A Flemish tapestry above the fireplace looks down on Gaenor and Pip sprawled on the floor over their chess-board, with Pip’s big dog beside them. Little Rosemary, in a yellow frock, leans against an armchair watching. And on the window-seat, framed by the dark red Spanish curtains, Tommy sits with Dick the bull terrier, at his feet, talking to John who is holding a tennis-racket and has his back to the room.

Chirk house parties were gloriously eclectic, actors and theatre designers, artists, writers, singers and musicians, mingling with foreign royal families (Margot’s speciality) and Tommy’s sporting friends. In the evening guests would be ushered to the Music Room for a programme: perhaps a concerto by the pianist Ivor Newton with Tommy accompanying on the organ, then songs from Oggie Lynn, Louise Edviner and Margot, closing with the Kutcher String Quartet. Margot’s sister, Poots, kept a piano in her bedroom where the more Bohemian guests would gravitate for jazz and carousing.

Night-time at Chirk brought no more extraordinary phenomenon than Tommy’s table talk. Often taciturn till the afternoon, he would unwind and be in full flow by bedtime, holding forth on Elizabethan drama, Russian music, Bayreuth or English opera. A too quiet child, a too talkative man, he said of himself, though acknowledging that he could be ‘a glint of phosphorescence in the wave of talk’.

A few visitors merit special mention. Wilson Steer, quiet and brilliant, produced masterly paintings of the castle in different lights and hues. He succeeded where other artists had failed, in painting Margot to her satisfaction, reclining in an armchair watching. Hilaire Belloc, clad in black and wearing sea-boots, delighted the children, proving the Trinity on paper, then constructing and letting off a vast hot-air balloon which he chased across the hills in a dilapidated Ford. Rudyard Kipling and his wife would stay for the sheepdog trials near Llangollen. He had an uncanny knack of understanding children and speaking on their level. Tommy had a special affection for Kipling’s work with its emphasis on courage and chivalry. But when Margot invited Kipling’s cousin, Stanley Baldwin – then Prime Minister – to stay with his wife, Tommy observed: ‘You really should not ask those sort of people’.

The trilogies

When The Cauldron of Annwn was published as a verse drama in 1922, Edmund Gosse reviewing it in The Manchester Guardian detected: ‘something large and noble in the conception … his characters remain too mythical for our keener sympathies, and yet a brave experiment’. Bronwen, the final part of the opera, was performed in Huddersfield in 1929 and taken on a northern tour by the Carl Rosa Company. Its Prelude and Birds of Rhiannon sequence
contain some of Holbrooke's loveliest music, whilst Tommy's verse has resonances of Swinburne:

*Fair and fast*

_The Horse of Dawn comes striding from the east,
Shaking his mane of scarlet; at his feet_
*Rings life reviving, radiant and released from clasp of night.*

Presenting his copy of the trilogy to the National Library of Wales, he described it as ‘a curiosity of literature’. Years later, on the centenary of Holbrooke’s birth (1978), Harold Truscott, composer and broadcaster, eulogised the operatic trilogy as ‘one of the glories of British opera’. Its reputation might have fared better had Bronwen come first, not last, in the sequence.

Completing his Byzantine trilogy, Tommy had *Heraclius* put on at the Holborn Empire in London (1924) and subsequently at the Cambridge Festival Theatre (1927). A psychological study of the emperor's character and religious scepticism, the play includes a dramatic scene in which Mahomet confronts Heraclius and demands that he and his followers convert; the Prophet's closing words – ‘the world will have no surgeon but the sword’ – eerily foreshadow the struggle between Christianity and Islam.

**Welsh theatre 1927–40**

In 1927 Tommy returned to the fray in Wales. The Welsh Drama League formed under his presidency aspired to secure a permanent national theatre with bilingual drama. He believed that spectacular productions of European plays with a director of international repute could help put Wales on the world map. Accordingly, for the 1927 Eisteddfod at Holyhead, he selected his old favourite *The Pretenders* and had it translated into Welsh. Theodor Komisarjevsky, the renowned Russian director, was engaged to put on Ibsen's medieval pageant before an audience of 10,000 in the Eisteddfod pavilion on a cliff top overlooking the sea. Komisarjevsky was struck by Tommy's enthusiasm: he 'offered his services as stage manager, directed the music off stage and even beat the drums and turned the wind machines himself.' At the end, greeting rapturous applause, Tommy expressed the hope that it would inspire a play on a great theme in Welsh history.

Within a few years the League had foundered, beset by internal squabbles. Undaunted, Tommy formed his own venture, *The Welsh National Theatre Company*, appointing Evelyn Bowen, a young Welsh actress, as director. Inspired by Reinhardt's open-air production of *Everyman* at Salzburg, he made Hugo Von Hofmannsthal's morality play his next grand project for the 1933 Eisteddfod at Wrexham. Flying to Vienna, he persuaded Dr Stefan Hock – Reinhardt's former assistant, now famous in his own right – to direct, whilst arranging a Welsh translation, and for the original costumes to be sent from Salzburg. Hock was ensconced at Chirk throughout the summer, struggling to train 300 amateurs whilst learning elementary Welsh. Opening night, with a full orchestra and Welsh choir, was a glorious spectacle enjoyed by thousands, including Shaw, Lilian Baylis and Sybil Thorndike in front row seats. Addressing the audience in the native tongue, Tommy noted with satisfaction that Death was played by an undertaker, Mammon by a trade union official and the Devil by a Wrexham chapel deacon.

Finding a home close to Chirk at Plas Newydd, Llangollen, the company set up a drama school to train actors, directors, designers and technicians alike; lectures and practice sessions embraced stage management, lighting and scene-design: actors received fencing instruction from Tommy, now president of the Amateur Fencing Association.

On tour the company found that staging performances in many different venues across Wales was an uphill battle: English-speaking directors struggled to direct Welsh-language plays; the dialects of North and South Wales differed; South Wales felt little affinity with a Llangollen-based company. When Bowen retired, her replacement, Meriel Williams helped reinvigorate the venture, but courted opposition by urging the Eisteddfod to promote drama over poetry, enraging the bard Cynan who denounced the company as ‘neither Welsh nor National nor a Theatre’.

In 1935 Tommy had Von Hofmannsthal's adaptation of Calderón's morality play *El Gran Teatro del Mundo* translated into English and Welsh to enable side-by-side performances in each language. Its title *Lwyfan y Bud – Theatre of the World* – provided the theme for a radio broadcast on 4 April 1936 in which he outlined his aims for a full-time national bilingual company. The play was put on in Liverpool – in English and Welsh – with Hock directing, and Holbrooke supplying incidental music. ‘A feast for eye and ear’ wrote one reviewer; but the Liverpool Welsh were outraged by the use of English actors.

A Welsh *Macbeth*, starring Thornridge and Emlyn Williams, had been planned for 1937, but it had to be shelved when the Eisteddfod Executive Committee refused to countenance an English actress as Lady Macbeth. Nevertheless, when performed with an all-Welsh cast at Llanelli the following year, it made history as the first recorded staging of a Shakespeare play in Welsh. Meanwhile *Lwyfan y Bud* was the highlight of 1937, performed in the ruins of Valle Crucis Abbey with a local choir and Tommy's special lighting effects – three angels, one appearing in each lancet of the east window.

Two years later war brought the venture to an end, as it had Tommy's previous campaign. Over 30 years he had changed the terms of debate: his enduring achievement was to secure recognition of drama as an integral part of Welsh culture, paving the way for a national theatre.
Closing Years: 1940–46

‘Go to it my lad. Be topical for once’, wrote Tommy, instructing Holbrooke to set Kipling’s poem, *Hymn before Action*, to music. War had broken out again. As Honorary Lieutenant Colonel, Tommy took pride in his regiment which he had resurrected following the Great War as an armoured car company. Too old for military service, he had to content himself with running the local home guard with his friend and deputy Colonel Poss Myddelton. Shades of *Dad’s Army* here: the horsebox placed in the castle gateway, housemaids taught to shoot, village women instructed to hurl methylated spirits at enemy tanks. The castle provided a year’s refuge to two groups of 40 women evacuated from Liverpool with their youngsters, a keen and captive audience for Tommy’s displays of model boats on the lake.

As time passed, the war increasingly restricted Tommy’s life. Margot had left for Canada with a bevy of grandchildren; his theatre venture was closed down; Seaford House, his cultural headquarters, was requisitioned. Yet there was still much to do on the home front, not least maintaining the many institutions and individuals dependent on his support. In addition, he oversaw and substantially helped fund a majestic work of historical scholarship, *The Complete Peerage*; two of the five volumes which he co-edited were published during the war. A far-sighted gift to the Society of Antiquaries in 1945 helped make possible a definitive *Dictionary of British Arms* only now in course of completion. For light relief he took weekly Welsh lessons, taught his eldest grandsons fencing, tossed off a ballad about the disappearing Earl of Moray with a chorus of elves and asked Holbrooke to set it to music (‘Give the singing elf a miss’).

Before the War Augustus John had brought the young Dylan Thomas to meet Tommy at Plas Llanina, an ancient manor he had acquired on the coast near Newquay. No doubt they discussed Dylan, Son of the Wave, and Llanina’s ghosts and legends: the sailors drowned in Cardigan Bay, the old village and church claimed by the sea. Tommy became Dylan’s patron. On Christmas Eve 1940, homeless and broke, Dylan wrote him a moving letter, seeking further help and enclosing six recent poems. Tommy settled his debts and let him have the Apple House, a stone cottage in the garden. ‘A really excellent workroom’, Dylan wrote in thanks, towards the end of the War. There are echoes of Llanina in *Under Milk Wood*’s voices of the long drowned and the ghostly midshipman pacing the shore in long coat and soft-peaked cap. In February 1946, months before his death, Tommy received a touching present: a copy of the poet’s brand-new volume of poems, *Deaths and Entrances*, inscribed ‘To Lord Howard de Walden from Dylan Thomas with every gratitude’.

As the Chirk lease expired, Tommy and Margot moved north to Dean Castle. Sad to depart, yet delighted by his newly restored medieval home, he loved to visit his Scottish tenants, discoursing seamlessly on every arcane subject. He retained his zest for life – ‘Thirteen grandchildren soon!!!!’ he ended his last letter to Holbrooke – but his health was broken. Struck down by cancer, he died on 5 November 1946 and was buried at the Dean. *The Times* obituary observed “More, perhaps, than any man of our time he fulfilled Aristotle’s description of the ‘magnificent man’.”

It is fitting that the National Trust celebrates the Howard de Walden era at Chirk in memory of Tommy and Margot, outstanding and life-enhancing patrons of British and Welsh culture and the arts. How thrilled Tommy would be to see the Welsh language and culture brimming with vitality and a national theatre in place. Throughout Wales and here at the castle let him be remembered by the simple bardic name he chose for himself, Ellis o’r Waun – Ellis from Chirk.

Tommy as an older man
Cover: Tommy in military uniform, c.1914
Contents: A sketch by Tommy

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