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Curiouser & curiouser

by [X.J. Kennedy](#)

Review of a new biography of W. S. Gilbert by Jane W. Stedman & The Complete Annotated Gilbert & Sullivan edited by Ian Bradley

The obstinately long-lived popularity of Gilbert and Sullivan's light operas has often been called a symptom of our nostalgia for things Victorian—and so Ian Bradley calls it in his massive new compilation. We crave, it is claimed, a simpler age: a time of innocence (for which read “asexuality” and “fun poked at slant-eyed foreigners”). All I can say is God help the historian who looks to *H.M.S. Pinafore* or *The Mikado* for precise reflections of their times. Gilbert, the deviser of plots for the Savoy operas, habitually viewed his times in a distorting mirror as grotesque as Lewis Carroll's vision of Wonderland. Exaggerating the absurdities of Victorian Britain, he rendered them curiouser and curiouser.

And so *Patience* creates a far more precious and affected aesthetic movement than Oscar Wilde and the Pre-Raphaelites ever embodied in person. (Indeed, it was Gilbert's business partner Richard D'Oyly Carte who sent Wilde on his tour of American mining camps, a tour meant as advance advertising for the opera.) Gilbert's penchant for caricature may be seen in those Savoy operas that turn England inside-out. In *Iolanthe*, Strephon, whom the Fairy Queen has made a leader of both Tories and Liberals, calls for a competitive examination to select peers, and thus revolutionize the House of Lords by strengthening its brainpower. In another *bouleversement*, the Pirates of Penzance are portrayed as upright and virtuous; the rest of the world, corruptible.

Throughout his career, as a critic summed it up in 1888, Gilbert strove to pierce the “pachydermatous hide” of British philistinism. The son of a humanist and reformer, he wrote a number of bleeding-heart problem plays about impoverished victims of the judicial system and virtuous, if fallen, women condemned by a hypocritical society. The Savoy operas abound in satire of recognizable types: *The Pirates of Penzance* twits incompetent public officials; *H.M.S. Pinafore* pokes fun at the First Lord of the Admiralty, raised to his exalted post by his skill at polishing the handle of the big front door. Over and over, Gilbert complained about the inequality of rich and poor in courts of law. This was the theme of his last successful play, *The Hooligan*. Still, for much of his life he belonged to a Tory club and lived the life of a country squire.

His collaborations with Sullivan add up to only a slim fraction of Gilbert's output. He churned out fiction, tragedies, burlesques, pantomimes, adaptations of French farces (with sex replaced by politics). Even at the height of the great team's popularity, Gilbert collaborated with other composers. He produced journalism, pamphlets, and books for children. For *Fun*, the rival of *Punch*, he emitted light verse galore. Collected as *The Bab Ballads*, it came illustrated with grotesque, scratchy cartoons from Gilbert's own hand.

Despite all this productivity, there have been few contemporary devotees of Gilbert without Sullivan. Gilbert has been less fortunate than his composer partner. Much of Sullivan's chamber music and his orchestral and symphonic work remain alive, not to mention his unkillable hymn-tunes (among them "Onward, Christian Soldiers"). Alas, poor Gilbert—even *The Bab Ballads* hardly remains a hot literary property, though I suspect it might make a far more engaging musical than the dismal *Cats*, so glumly inspired by T. S. Eliot. In his skits for the popular stage, Gilbert perfected his skills as a word juggler, tossing off such masterpieces as the line "In my chilly chalet shilly shallying" as early as 1867. He could fill in the lines to a song at top speed, after he had a plot blocked out, and his talent burned brightly to the end. In *His Excellency*, a forgotten late opera written to music by Osmond Carr, a company of hussars is ordered to behave like ballet dancers:

Never was seen such tawdry trickery:
Soldiers, tough as oak or hickory,
Turned to votaries of Terpsichore.

Yet for all his colossal verbal skill and his prodigious industry, Gilbert might be a merely academic name today were it not for Sullivan. By blending Gilbert's verbal tomfoolery with infectious tunes and brilliant orchestrations, Sullivan carried Gilbert to a peak of Parnassus he might otherwise have quickly slipped from, or never attained. His skill helped to obscure the fact that the last Savoy operas—*Utopia Limited*, *The Grand Duke*—were so largely involved in multiple plots as to lose focus.

That as time went on the two men quarreled seems inevitable. Gilbert's cantankerousness grated on the sensitive Sullivan. Both were proud craftsmen, and set themselves lofty standards. Gilbert loved ghosts; Sullivan didn't, and wrote spooky music that set Gilbert's teeth on edge. Sullivan once complained to Carte that for years he had been a mere cipher in the team, that in Gilbert's domineering rehearsals of the chorus, his music had been "cruelly murdered." He had wearied of clockwork buffoons and improbable plots. He yearned to do grand opera "where words are to suggest music, not to govern it." Gilbert, too, longed to do serious work on his own—as his problem plays, mostly flops, make clear. And yet the two were drawn back again and again to collaborating, for Sullivan had a mistress to keep, and Gilbert a yacht, a country estate, and a wife who entertained lavishly. With other collaborators, neither could attain the artistic and box-office success of *Pinafore* or *The Mikado*, although Sullivan's early musical extravaganza *Cox and Box*, with libretto by F. C. Burnand, did all right. We have the impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte to credit with reconciling them again and again. When it cohered, their mutual art could go deep. In their masterpiece, *The Yeomen of the Guard*, the clown-hero Jack Point either dies or swoons in despair at the final curtain—Gilbert leaves it up to the audience to choose. Staged with tact, Jack's crushing defeat is a moment of tremendous poignancy.

As Jane W. Stedman's new biography reveals, Gilbert's energetic career spanned several areas of Victorian society. In early life he was a barrister, in late life a magistrate; he spent time as a clerk in the civil service; he became a lieutenant in the Royal Aberdeenshire Militia and a news correspondent during the Franco-Prussian war. His contributions to the modern stage loom large. By 1879 he had made himself the leading playwright of his era, and if Stedman is correct, developed the acting technique of playing comic roles soberly. (Could no earlier actor or director have thought to crack jokes with a straight face? But surely Gilbert's penchant for populating a stage with characters unaware of their own absurdity helped to bring to fruition *The Importance of Being Earnest*.) For years Gilbert protested against the censorial shears of the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays, who at the height of his power could forbid references to the royal family, public officials, and Biblical persons, and eliminate any trace of sexuality. Nevertheless, Gilbert broke new ground in admitting dangerous subject matter: the fallen woman, the sexual double standard.

He proved himself a superb actor and director. At rehearsals he would act out a part, just the way he wanted it performed, and woe to the thespian who willfully strayed from the text. When he made his fortune, he built the Garrick Theatre. He was the first established playwright of his day to supply a play to a music hall. And as a playwright Gilbert succeeded in gaining dominion over his actors and producers, thus opening the way for the all-powerful and demanding Bernard Shaw. Annoyed at having inferior lyrics by other hands inserted in his early burlesque sketches, Gilbert fought and won. Perhaps emboldened by being a barrister himself, he often resorted to the law to gain his ends. He once sued an actress who had reneged on a contract, and, after a falling out over the cost of carpets for the Savoy Theatre, sued his partner Richard D'Oyly Carte. Gilbert must be among the most litigious writers in history. Although at times a sentimental softy, he was usually a hard-skinned pincher of pennies. Tough as he was, he survived and thrived in an era of riotous audiences and critics quicker to jeer than to cheer.

Stedman, an emeritus professor from Roosevelt University, seems to have digested Gilbert's whole output with cast-iron bowels. As she notes with clear satisfaction, she has produced a fuller and more factually reliable life of Gilbert than Hesketh Pearson's of 1957, if, I would say, at some cost to readability. Stedman seems never quite sure of what matters. Gilbert's unlisted phone number is at last disclosed, also the exact amount of change in a purse snatched from his country house. After detailing Gilbert's untimely death by drowning while trying to rescue a screaming but not really endangered teenage girl, Stedman records the diet of his widow: "She, too, liked fruit and insisted on having it sent when she went on holiday. 'Oh, those peaches again!' exclaimed her gardener." But perhaps, after acquaintance with a writer who exulted in trivia, such an attitude was bound to rub off.

To her credit, Stedman has cleared away a good deal of idle rumor, and she won't swear to a fact she can't document. At what spiritual expense did the two geniuses keep making up and collaborating against their independent wills? She refrains from much speculation. Was Gilbert a covert lecher? No evidence for the accusation exists, despite his penchant for taking budding divas under his wing, and the meaning of the little *x*'s with which he peppered his secret diary—denoting assignations?—remains a mystery. Generously, Stedman appears fond of the man, for all Gilbert's short-fused temper. She would make a fine advocate for him at the bar of the Last Judgment.

Not surprisingly, out of all Gilbert's writings, the hornets of annotation seem to have swarmed only upon the thirteen Savoy operas still performed today. *The Complete and Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan* omits their very first effort, *Thespis*, for which only parts of the music survive. Ian Bradley, a Scottish clergyman, has done a loving job. He has turned up such delectable trivia as a letter from Lewis Carroll piously complaining about the word "damme" in *Pinafore*; he reveals the targets of Gilbert's parodic thrusts; and he details some practical jokes that Savoy actors played on one another, such as that of placing a fifty-six-pound stage weight in Nanki-Poo's bundle of belongings just before a leading tenor tried to shoulder it. Of particular value are the texts to songs dropped from the Savoy productions, and concise introductions to each opera, setting forth sources and summing up how the work went over in its time.

The present book enlarges, corrects, and professes to complete Bradley's earlier *Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan*; however, the facing pages contain enough blank space to hint that aspirations toward absolute completeness are still possible. Meanwhile, with Gilbert's text on the right-hand pages and Bradley's notes on the left, the new tome is already too stout to hold comfortably. But it will supply a good desk-top browse, and it will make an ideal missile to hurl, the next time you go to an amateur production of *Iolanthe*.

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