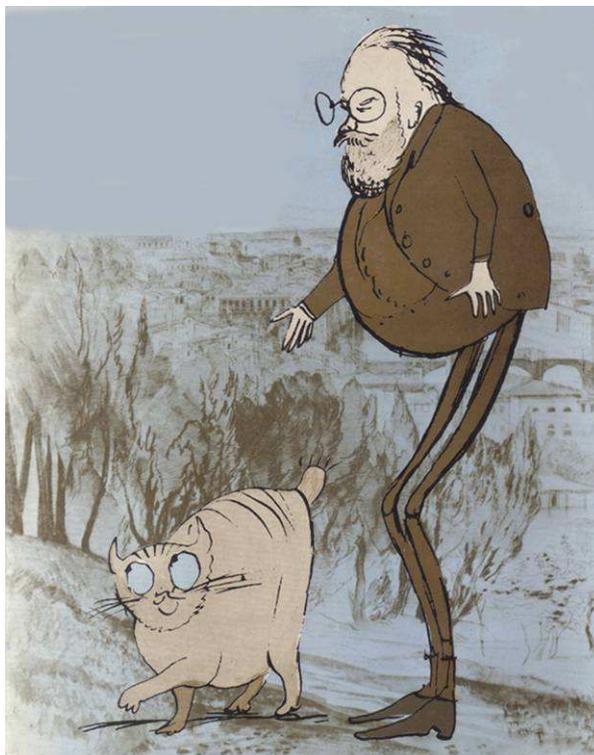


Lear's Bicentenary: Fun on the Riviera

By Michael Nelson

2012, when this article was written, was the bicentenary of the birth of Edward Lear, one of the first English artists to spend winters on the Riviera. He was not only an artist, but also a writer and it was in Cannes that he wrote his most famous poem: The Owl and the Pussycat. Lear's years on the Riviera spanned no less than a third of his life.



Edward Lear was born in Holloway, London, on 12 May 1812, the twentieth of the twenty-one children of Jeremiah Lear, a stockbroker, and his wife Ann. His mother saw thirteen of her children die. The boy had an unhappy childhood, rejected by his mother, and mainly brought up by his sister Ann. His passion was watercolour drawing.

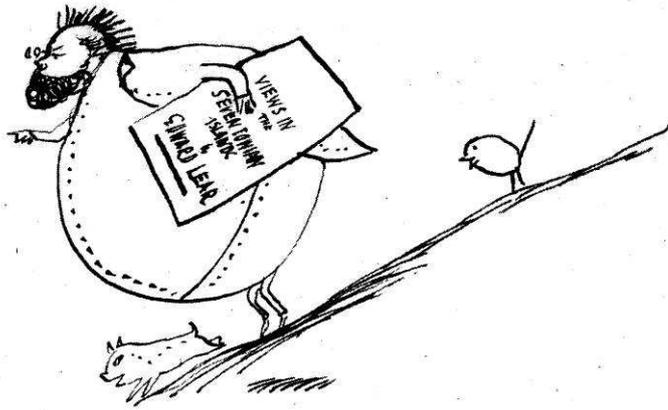
He first travelled abroad in 1833, when he visited Holland, Switzerland and Germany, but in 1837 he visited Italy for the first time. The country overwhelmed him and he produced vast numbers of watercolours. In 1841, after his fifth visit, he published Views in Rome and its Environs. In 1846, following the publication of Illustrated Excursions in Italy, Lear was invited by Queen Victoria to give her 12 lessons in drawing. She was very proud that the artist had been pleased with her drawing.

Shortly after the publication of his second book on Italy he published A Book of Nonsense by Derry down Derry, containing seventy two limericks. The first book of limericks – The History



of Sixteen Wonderful Old Women - was published 1821 and the following year came Anecdotes and Adventures of Fifteen Gentlemen, the book that inspired Lear. He never used the word limerick, but it was he who put them on the map.

In the succeeding years he widened his travel to



include France, Malta, Greece, Turkey, Albania and Egypt and other places in the Middle East.

The artist never married although he said he would have liked to have done so. "I wish to goodness I could get a wife," he wrote to friend. "You have no idea how sick I am of living alone." One probable reason he never married was that he was an epileptic: he would have had

to have broken the secret of his epilepsy to his wife and might have passed on the disease to his children. It was so serious an affliction that sometimes he had several attacks a day. He was also asthmatic. It was his poor health which drew him to the Riviera.

He rejected Menton: "too shut in and befizzled a place for me", he wrote in Mr Lear's Wurbl Inventions: a little dictionary.

In November 1864 Lear travelled to Nice for the winter. The rooms he found were very expensive, but he had to be in a fashionable part of Nice in order to attract buyers for his paintings. Number 61 Promenade des Anglais could not have been smarter.

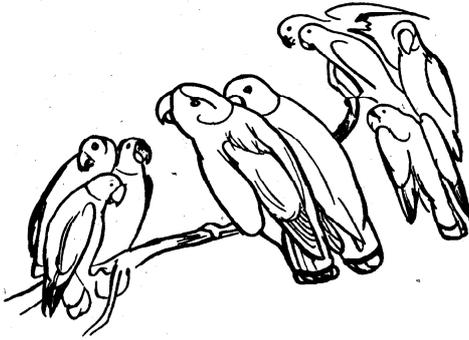


He immediately plunged into work : "Suddenly resolved to see if I could do four £5 drawings in a day or even three. I began small drawings of Nice, Villefranche etc and by four had nearly penned out all." He also worked at what he called "Tyrants." They were copies of pictures he had already painted.

He put in all the outlines and then colour by colour. It was a mechanical operation and very profitable. That winter he produced no less than 240 drawings.

After a month's hard work he needed a break and set out with his servant Giorgio to walk along the coast to Genoa. It was very cold and on the whole he was not very impressed with what he saw. On 11 December he wrote in his diary: "Obscure torrents and unpleasant villages: roaring sea: - but no peacock blue bays nor any other pleasure." The walked between sixteen and twenty miles a day and got back to Nice on New Year's Eve. But at least he brought back with him 144 drawings to sell in his pricey apartment. What he called local swells began to crowd into his room and bought local views. His diary of 11 February reads: "At 12 or 1 - came Ld. & Ly. Fitzwilliam, in the simplest kindest way, wanting 6 more drawings, & gave me a cheque for £100." The Tsarina of Russia wanted to visit him. "It

would be better to sell no more drawings here than to involve oneself in endless risk of loss of time and temper by contact with royalty," he commented.

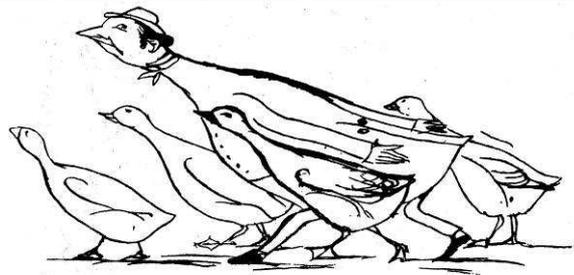


By the end of February, as the weather improved, he was feeling better: "Blue olives, blue sea and blue Estrelles. This day was perfect in loveliness, sea a sheet of emerald green, real ultramarine like a Maccaw's tail feathers." (Image left)

Pipple-Popple, which he wrote on 13 February 1865. He presented it to Lady Charlotte and the Honourables Hugh and Reginald Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, whom he described as "jolly, cheerful Children."

He only wrote one limerick about Nice:

*There was an Old Person of Nice,
Whose associates were usually Geese,
They walked out together,
In all sorts of weather,
That affable Person of Nice.*

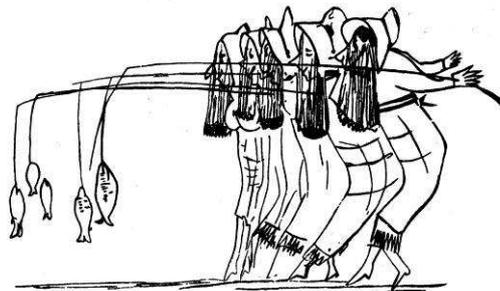


Rudyard Kipling also wrote a limerick about Nice:

*There were two young ladies of Nice,
Who drank seven cocktails apiece
Then they tried to undress
In the Paris express,
But were stopped by the local police.*

Lear also wrote one about Marseilles:

*There was an Old Man of Marseilles,
Whose daughters wore bottle-green veils;
They caught several fish,
Which they put in a dish,
And sent to the Pa' at Marseilles*



Some old friends were wintering in Nice, but on the whole he did not like the English society. This is how he described Nice in letters to friends: "The sun blazes away all day, blue sky and blue sea, red roses, green pease and all sorts of southern luxuries. But as a set off, the atmosphere of swelldom & total idleness of this place is odious Society here is gregarious not social. Lord! How I hate the bustle & lights & fuss of 'society' - social in reality as is my nature – not gregarious. Geese, swine, gnats &c are gregarious."

In April Lear returned to London where the Riviera drawings sold quickly.

Lear did not return to the Riviera for two years, but in November 1867 chose to winter Cannes. He moved into rooms (which he said “disgusted” him in the Villa Montarêt at 6 Rue St. Honoré, a small street between the Rue des Belges and the Rue des Serbes. He said it had “sun=aspect for health – light to work. & position &c. for swells to come to.” But the air there was unpleasantly cold – “simply cayenne pepper frozen”. And for a month nobody bought anything.

He later wrote: ‘... could Cannes have been saved from the VULGAR – it might really have been Paradise.’ Lear was particularly influenced by his difficulty in selling his paintings there and the philistinism of some of the residents when they came to his studio. ‘What books did you copy all these drawings from?’, asked one lady. ‘O don’t look at the drawings – only come & see the view from the window,’ cried another. “The conventional life of an English Colony like Cannes is terribly tiresome, & I half wish I had not fixed there,” he wrote to a friend.

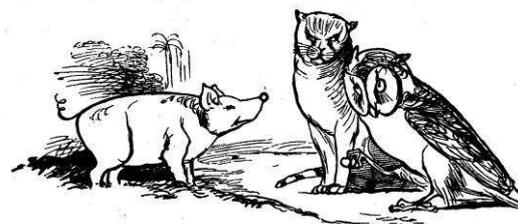
Never-the-less, Prosper Mérimée, the distinguished French author, was a friend and introduced him to John Addington Symonds and his family, including his 2½ year-old daughter Janet. ‘Mr Lear... makes rhymes for her and illustrates them; one about “the owl and the pussy-cat, who went to sea in a pea-green boat” is notable...’, Symonds wrote to a friend.

*The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea
In a beautiful pea-green boat,
They took some honey, and plenty of
money,
Wrapped up in a five-pound note.*



*The Owl looked up to the stars above,
And sang to a small guitar,
'O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love,
What a beautiful Pussy you are,
You are, You are!
What a beautiful Pussy you are!'*

*Pussy said to the Owl, 'You elegant fowl!
How charmingly sweet you sing!
O let us be married! too long we have tarried:
But what shall we do for a ring?'*



*They sailed away, for a year and a day,
To the land where the Bong-tree grows,
And there in a wood a Piggy-wig stood,
With a ring at the end of his nose,
His nose, His nose,
With a ring at the end of his nose.*

*Dear Pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling
Your ring?' Said the Piggy, 'I will.'
So they took it away, and were married next day
By the Turkey who lives on the hill.*



*They dined on mince, and slices of quince,
Which they ate with a runcible spoon;
And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,
They danced by the light of the moon,
The moon, The moon,
They danced by the light of the moon.*

Many French admire Lear's work, much of which has been translated into French. The most famous is, of course *Sire Hibou et Dame Chat*.

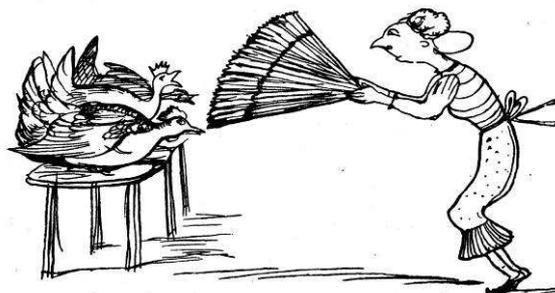
Symonds and Lear had similar backgrounds. Both had suffered separation from their mothers at the age of four and had been brought up in mainly feminine households. They were frequently ill as children and carried psychosomatic illness into adulthood. Today we would probably call them bi-polar.

Symonds also disliked Cannes, so they could grumble together and Lear could write nonsense verse about the place. Of that more later.

In December 1868 and 1869 he returned to winter in Cannes. In Cannes in 1869 he must have been taken by the cuisine because he wrote a lot of nonsense about food. Three of his recipes were for an Amblongus pie, crumbobblious cutlets and gosky patties, whatever they are.

This is his Cannes limerick:

*There was an Old Person of Cannes,
Who purchased three fowls and a fan;
These she placed on a stool,
And to make them feel cool
She constantly fanned them at Cannes.*

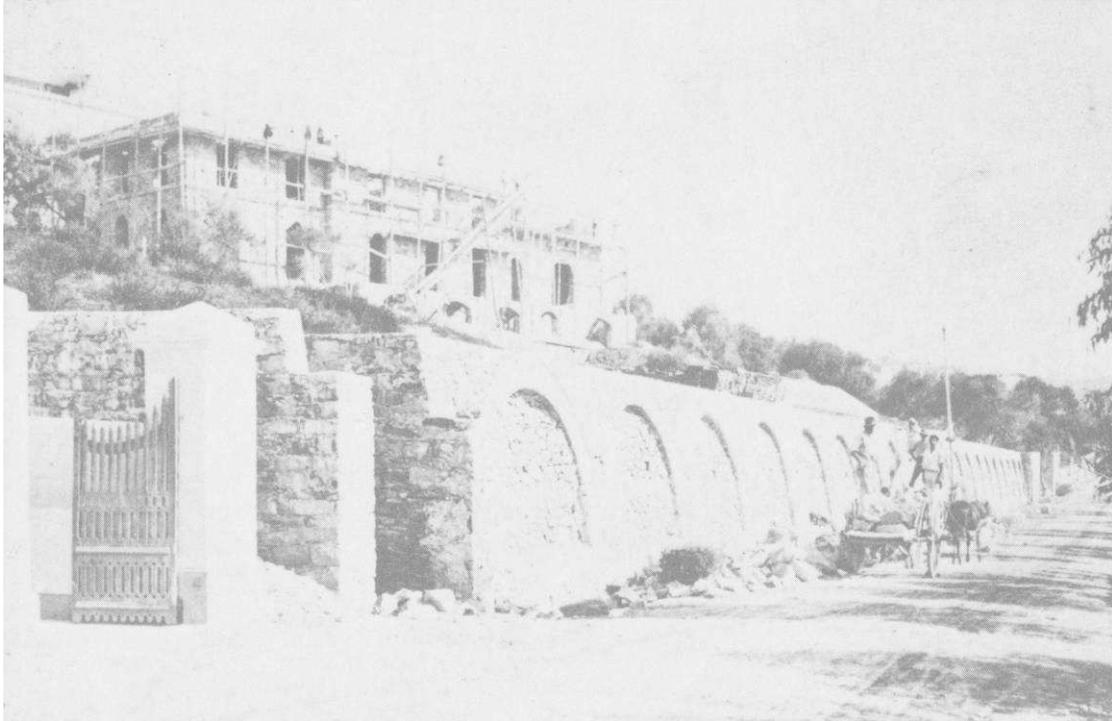


By 1870 he felt he ought to settle down. The possibility of a Franco-Prussian war caused him to reject France and choose Italy. This was how he explained his thinking to Holman Hunt, the famous painter of *The Light of the World*, who, although 15 years younger than Lear, he always called "Daddy":

Dear Daddy

I am more or less convinced that I have talent enough to do some good Topographical painting yet, what though I am 58 - if only I could attain "North light" & "quiet". The idea of getting permanently rooted in England I gave up totally last year - reluctantly however, - for I could well have liked to live near the Tennysons. But how to pass from October to May shivering & coughing? - & how, if I lived that time abroad, - to pay for 2 dwellings continuously, an attempt I have already broken down in? - So therefore, I decided that a permanent Winter place - not a summer place, must be found. - Next, for beauty of scenery, Cannes seemed the properest spot - but I, who have tried it for 3 years. judged otherwise. The first year I was there, there also happened to be many of my friends - & so I sold a good many drawings: - but afterwards, the true character of the place became evident, - a haunt of rich or Aristocratic people - all perhaps good - but all absolutely idle. All smiles & goodness if they could take up the whole of an artist's time - "we shall be so delighted if you will let us come & sit in your studio while you work!" - said one of many gt. ladies to me - "we will stay

all the day! we should' never be tired!" - but on the Artist showing a little notion of independence & self assertion - he was quite thrown by, & other painters - awful daubers! - taken up - or art altogether ignored. So it has come to pass that I have never had one single commission to draw or paint the beautiful scenery of Cannes, & only 30 pounds did I gain from visitors all last season! ... Thereupon I came to San Remo, a place which while I live must be comparatively quiet (Cannes grows at the rate of 10 new hotels and 200 houses yearly.)



So he bought a piece of land in San Remo and built a house, the Villa Emily. But disaster eventually struck. His neighbour, Thomas Hanbury, whom he regarded as a friend, bought a piece of land and built a hotel which blocked Lear's view of the sea and reduced the light in his studio.

Lear sold the Villa Emily and in 1881 built another property, the Villa Tennyson (image above). It had to be identical to the Villa Emily otherwise Foss, Lear's famous cat (image right), would not have liked it.



He made a number of friends in San Remo and, with Miss Bevan, daughter of the British Vice-Consul in San Remo, in April 1879 wrote this:

*"How pleasant to know Mr Lear!"
Who has written such volumes of stuff!
Some think him ill-tempered and queer,
But a few think him pleasant enough.*

*He has ears, and two eyes, and ten fingers,-
(Leastways if you reckon two thumbs;)
Long ago he was one of the singers,
But now he is one of the dumms.*

*He sits in a beautiful parlour,
With hundreds of books on the wall;
He drinks a great deal of Marsala,
But never gets tipsy at all.*

*He has many friends, laymen and clerical;
Old Foss is the name of his cat; -
His body is perfectly spherical; -
He weareth a runcible hat.*

*When he walks in a waterproof white
The children run after him so!
Calling out, - "He's come out in his night-
Gown, that crazy old Englishman, - O!"*

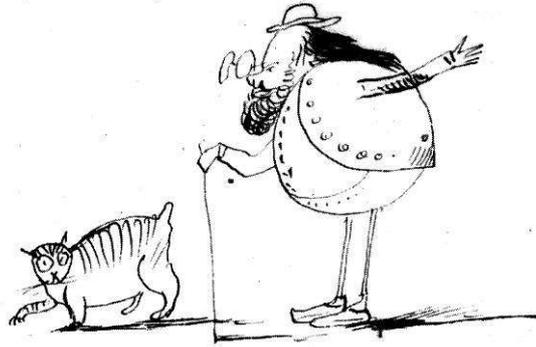
*He weeps by the side of the ocean,
He weeps on the top of the hill;
He purchases pancakes and lotion,
And chocolate shrimps from the mill.*

*He reads, but cannot speak, Spanish;
He cannot abide ginger-beer. -
Ere the days of his pilgrimage vanish, -
"How pleasant to know Mr Lear!"*

There was a rumour that the Queen Victoria would visit Lear's new house and garden when she was staying in nearby Menton. Giorgio Kocali, Lear's long-time servant, worked day and night baking macaroons because it was well known that the Queen

ate macaroons continually and made her Suite do the same. Lord Spencer, the President of the Council, who was in attendance on Victoria, came to lunch and more than 100 "owly fools" waited outside to greet her, but she never came. The story was that she could not come because of the protocol that would have been involved with the Italian government. But that was clearly not the case since she visited other gardens across the border into Italy.

Lear was no doubt disappointed because he was proud of his garden, but he wrote to a friend: *'I dislike contact with Royalty as you know, being a dirty landscape-painter apt only to speak his thoughts and not to conceal them.'* The following year he described the garden the monarch would have seen: *'And my garden is now admirably beautiful, & and were it not for*



the Slugs and Snails would be inimitable. But these melancholy mucilaginous Molluscs have eaten up all my Highercynths & also my Lowercynths.' He was particularly proud of his roses, as is seen by these verses which he penned in 1885:

*And this is certain; if so be
You could just now my garden see,
The aspic of my flowers so bright
Would make you shudder with delight.*

*And if you voz to see my roziz
As is a boon to all men's noziz,-
You'd fall upon your back and scream -
O Lawk! O cricky! It's a dream!*

But there was a consolation for the absence of the Queen. While he was dining one evening he saw a little woman looking at him through the dining room door. In due course the man with her opened the door and addressed him: 'My wife wishes to know if you are Mr Lear, and she would be glad to make your acquaintance again – the Princess Royal of England.' The man was her husband, Frederick William, the Crown Prince of Prussia. Some years earlier, when Lear had met the Princess Royal and Princess Alice of Hesse-Darmstadt on the Riviera, he had commented that in a lower rank they might have been called flippant and common. Lear was more complimentary later in 1882 when he met the Princess Royal again. 'Distinctly Princess Victoria is the most absolute duck of a Princess imaginable, so natural and unaffected, with a real simplicity one feels is not an affectation of simplicity,' he wrote in his diary.

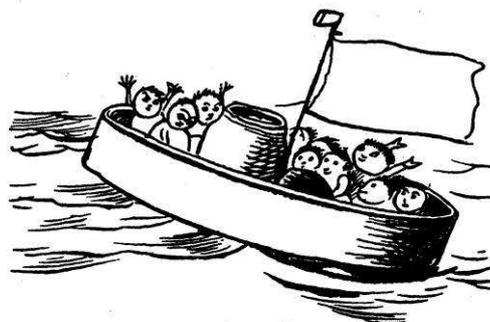
In his diary for 31 December 1870 Lear wrote that he went to see the Sandbach family who lived in San Remo. Only little Sophy was at home and he read her *The Jumblies*, the famous story of the people who went to sea in a sieve.

*They went to sea in a Sieve, they did,
In a Sieve they went to sea:
In spite of all their friends could say,
On a winter's morn, on a stormy day,
In a Sieve they went to sea!*

*And when the Sieve turned round and round,
And every one cried, "You'll all be drowned!"
They called aloud, "Our Sieve ain't big,
But we don't car a button! We don't care a fig!
In a Sieve we'll go to sea!"*

*Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.*

"Do you know," said Sophy, "I really don't see how they could have gone to sea in a sieve."
"A more delightful little creature I never saw," wrote Lear.



Lear had borrowed from a rhyme of 1784:

*Three wise men of Gotham
They went to sea in a bowl
And if the bowl had been stronger
My song had been longer.*

Lear died in San Remo on Sunday, 29 January 1888 and is buried there.

As Lear said:

"I must stop now, as the little gold watch said when the fat blue-beetle got into his inside."

But we are not entirely finished. On the ninth of December 1867 Lear composed in Cannes the Growling Eclogue of complaints about Cannes. My dictionary tells me that an eclogue is a short poem, especially a pastoral dialogue. The Interlocutors were Edward Lear, John Symonds and his wife Catherine. Today, I play Edward Lear John Symonds and Catherine.



Portrait of Edward Lear by Wilhelm Marstrand

3179 words

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