Swinburne Footnote

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because of the vagaries and delays of bibliographical indexing, I have only recently discovered your very interesting comments in May, 1971 on the relations between the Victorian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne and his housemate Theodore Watts-Dunton. I may perhaps be able to throw some further light on the passage from Osbert Sitwell's Noble Essences (Boston: Little, Brown, 1950) which you quote:

But what does he [Edmund Gosse] mean exactly when he refers in a letter to Swinburne's fear of Watts-Dunton? [see Evan Charteris, The Life and Letters of Sir Edmund Gosse (New York: Harper, 1931), p. 407.] It must mean something, but he never explains it.... He told me once that he was sure the whole world would come round to his view of the way in which Watts-Dunton had behaved. When I asked him what would effect the change, he replied that he thought that when it transpired that they had made identical wills, each leaving everything to the other, but that Swinburne at the time was possessed of money and Watts-Dunton of nothing, this would produce a great alteration in the public mind. (p. 49)

Your initial and very natural reaction to this was: "Now, doesn't that seem filled with hints for an article, probably to be titled--SWINBURNE MURDERED BY WATTS-DUNTON, POET FOUND DROWNED IN BATHTUB, or some such exciting bit!?!" I guess that my addition to your researches would have to be less excitingly entitled GOSSE, WATTS-DUNTON, AND SWINBURNE'S WILL, but what I've been able to learn might interest you.

That Swinburne left his entire estate to Watts-Dunton is incontrovertible (dated February 3, 1904, the will was published in the London Times on May 18, 1909, p. 13), and several biographers suggest that Swinburne's relatives resented the bequest. But the dark hints which Sitwell quotes from Gosse are the remnants of an even more malicious rumor which George Moore ascribed to Gosse in Avowals (1919; rpt. New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926):

GOSSE. ... nothing happened till the day came when Swinburne had to make a will, for Watts-Dunton had no money, and the thought of his friend des-
stitute in his old age was painful to Swinburne.
But who was to make the will? Watts-Dunton, who began life as an attorney in the Midlands ... could not draw up a will in which he inherited all Swinburne's property, the law being that a man cannot be a beneficiary under a will that he himself has drawn up; and to introduce a solicitor into The Pines [the home of Swinburne and Watts-Dunton] and let him into its secret, for it to be known that Watts-Dunton was Swinburne's heir, would be publicly intolerable. The quandary was a difficult one and must have cost the old attorney many a sleepless night.

MOORE. Balzac!

GOSSE. But at last he determined to take the risk and made the will. Another reason for this step was that Watts-Dunton was not unmindful of his poor relations ...

MOORE. The will was not contested?

GOSSE. ... of course, the Swinburnes never thought of disputing the will. Why should they? It represented the intentions of their late relative, there could be no doubt of that, and that was sufficient for them. But Nature, always wonderful, exacts a little tribute even when she is most kind, and when Miss Isabel Swinburne [the poet's sister] came to the villa to see Watts-Dunton on business matters she could not refrain from dropping in the word heir -- you see, Mr. Watts-Dunton, you who are the heir. The word was like an icicle in the old man's collar, freezing his very marrow and leaving him shivering after his visitor had left him, asking himself if after all she knew the will was not valid.

(pp. 84-85)

When this dialogue first appeared in print, it was met with a response in the Times Literary Supplement (November 27, 1919) which included this paragraph:

In justice to Mr. Watts-Dunton's memory, we beg you to allow us to give publicity to the actual facts of the case. The will in question was prepared by our firm, as solicitors for Mr. Swinburne and all the members of
his family, on written instructions received by our senior partner direct from Mr Swinburne. The draft of the will and Mr. Swinburne's holograph letter containing his instructions are now before us.

We are, yours faithfully,

LONGBOURNE, STEVENS, and POWELL
?, Lincoln's Inn-fields, W. C. 2

Mr. Forbes S. Weir, of A.F. and R.W. Tweedle, the law firm in London which absorbed Longbourne and Co., has written to me that Swinburne's holograph letter and the draft of his will were destroyed some years ago with other old records. But I see no reason not to believe that the letter to the Times Literary Supplement is true and accurate. Indeed, Watts-Dunton himself described to Isabel Swinburne the afternoon when Swinburne made his will. In the Rutgers University Library is a copy of Watts-Dunton's letter to Isabel (May 11, 1904) which describes the process. After excusing himself for not having written in some time, Watts-Dunton continues:

Heswrote to Mr. Longbourne & told him his wishes about a will, and L's clerk came one afternoon & finished it off in a few minutes, for Algernon was all impatient to go on with the important business of reading out to me a chapter from QUENTIN DURWARD.

In this matter of Swinburne's will at least, Watts-Dunton appears to have done nothing deserving of Gosse's viciousness.

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Ed.'s Note: