

DOVER BEACH

**A MEDITATION ON MATTHEW ARNOLD'S POEM 'DOVER
BEACH'**

By Adrian Rogers

The sea is calm tonight

The tide is full, the moon lies fair

Upon the straits – on the French coast the light

Gleams and is gone...

A tranquil nocturne one would think, and certainly those opening lines give the reader no hint of what's to come. The poet, Matthew Arnold; 1822—1888 wrote with a polished, and usually uncontroversial technique, yet this poem soon belies its calm opening mood. Matthew, (son of the famous Rugby School Headmaster Thomas Arnold) wrote his best poetry in the 1860s and 70s; at a time when the British Empire was reaching the apex of its power and prestige, yet this poem expresses none of that seeming confidence, though for a while the nocturnal mood continues...

...the cliffs of England stand,

Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

Come to the window, sweet is the night air...

Lovely indeed, until the tone darkens, bringing what I call 'the sad procession' into focus...

Listen! You hear the grating roar

Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling...

This focus upon one sound out of many is the first hint that all is not going to be as one might expect. The rhythms and sounds of the sea at night are generated by waves that roll...

*...With tremendous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in...*

This was not Arnold's first example of mood change in mid-poem. He did the same in Scholar Gipsy, beginning with an elegiac, pastoral, backwards look in time, followed by a pessimistic reflection on the social and intellectual conditions of Victorian England. In Dover Beach however he is thinking upon Sophocles hearing those same sounds "long ago" in the Aegean, bringing...

*Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery...*

It might be helpful to note at this point that Arnold did not share his Father's religious faith. Thomas Arnold, probably the greatest educator in his time, perhaps even the father of modern education was an Anglican priest. Matthew however, observing the world in which he found himself, as any poet must, with its prosperity, pretensions, and Dickensian inequalities obviously felt unable to share the confidence that a firm, traditionally moulded set of Christian beliefs might have generated.

*The sea of Faith
Was once too, at the full, and round earth's shores
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar...*

Yet if any of us from today's world could speak to the poet directly we might say; "You may be right; perhaps faith did once girdle the world, but that was before Charles Darwin and Karl Marx had turned that world upside down." Was Arnold sensing, despite the pomposity, power, and confidence of empire that his country, indeed his world had reached a turning point in time, was moving into another paradigm, and had 'passed the point of no return'? If so, it would explain his assumption that this world...

*...Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain...*

I rather doubt that those who made the boast; “The sun never sets upon the British Empire” would have liked this poem, which suggests to me that Arnold, so seemingly traditional in his verse style, was in some ways quite modern thinking in ways we can relate to. Look at his conclusion...

*And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

I confess to not initially liking this ending, inconclusive yet jarringly abrupt. One would have preferred a return to the soothing calm of the opening, as if to reassure oneself, that despite appearances and evidence to the contrary, all would turn out right in the end. Tennyson might have made it right; In Memoriam, and Idylls of the King struggle through to hopeful endings, but he was Poet Laureate, so probably felt obliged to sound accordingly upbeat. Kipling, poet above all others of the British Empire would no doubt have cheered us up, but not Arnold. He was concerned with truth as he saw it regardless of public opinion, a small example of which can be seen in the way the poem addresses his wife directly;

“Ah love, let us be true to one another...”

So the Poet said what he had to say, and stopped, refusing to profess a confidence he did not feel, and in that I detect integrity.

References

All quotations in this essay are taken from the Penguin Book of English Verse.

Bio

My name is **Adrian Cedric Rogers**; I was born in England, trained as a teacher in Ireland, teaching in that country, then in Scotland, The Shetland Islands, England, Australia, and Papua New Guinea, before retiring in 2005, thereafter devoting much of my time to writing. I have six fantasy novels in print, four published by Double Dragon in Canada, and two by Mountain Mist in Australia. I also have two novels issued (also by Double Dragon) as e-books. I have contributed poetry, articles, and short stories to numerous periodicals and anthologies. I also have three collections of poetry published by Ginninderra Press, Port Adelaide, Australia, and the latest being launched on 20th November.