

THE WATTS-DUNTON LETTER BOOKS

BY LESLIE A. MARCHAND

LESLIE A. MARCHAND, *Professor of English in the College of Arts and Sciences of Rutgers and editor of the Journal, discovered in 1947 in England the Symington Collection which was acquired by the Library. Among the manuscripts in that Collection were the Watts-Dunton letter books here described.*

DURING the late nineteenth century Walter Theodore Watts-Dunton was held in an amazing esteem as critic, poet, romance writer, and friend of writers. It is difficult now to understand how so minor a writer could have acquired such a tremendous prestige. Despite the temporary fame that came to him on the publication in his sixty-sixth year (1898) of his gypsy romance *Aylwin*, he is chiefly remembered now as the friend, protector, and business manager of Algernon Charles Swinburne, who lived with him at "The Pines," Putney Hill, from 1879 until his (Swinburne's) death in 1909. But Watts (he added his mother's name of Dunton with a hyphen in 1896) was also one of the closest friends of D. G. Rossetti before the latter's death, and had counted in his circle of intimates some of the greatest writers of the century. In the last analysis it was his capacity for friendship which made him welcome in literary circles, for his own writing was less than inspired and little original, and seen in the perspective of years was cramped by many of the narrower prejudices of the Victorian middle class culture in which he was nurtured.

The really strange thing is that Watts should have won and kept the friendship of the most eccentric and unconventional of all the writers of the late Victorian period. All his protestations notwithstanding, the tendency if not the aim of his last years with Swinburne was to tame the wild bear he was proud to exhibit and to channel the poet's energies and his writing into safe and conventional paths. He kept an eagle eye on those who wrote critical or biographical articles on his protégé, acted as go-between with anthologists who wished to include poems of Swinburne, and encouraged the author of *Faustine* and *Laus Veneris* to write critical articles on Shakespeare for periodicals and encyclopedias.

With the Symington Collection, acquired by Rutgers in 1948,

there came to the Library seven thick foolscap folio volumes containing copies of the business and personal letters written by Watts-Dunton from "The Pines," 11 Putney Hill, Surrey, between 1889 and 1907. These letter books, relic of a time before typewriters and carbon paper made such labors unnecessary, throw an interesting light on the literary world and the social and business customs at the turn of the century. The bulk of the letters belong to the period after 1900, but there are a number of interesting ones written in the nineties. Some of the earlier ones are copied in Watts-Dunton's own large scrawl, but most of them, after his eyesight failed in the later years, are in the neat script of an amanuensis or secretary.

In turning over the leaves of these letter books, one who has heard Watts-Dunton spoken of as one of the most brilliant critics of his age and who knows something of the range of his friendships among the chief literary men and women of the last half of the nineteenth century will be disappointed to find very little acute critical comment or fascinating reminiscence of either the giants of the past or the new generation of writers who were contemporaries of his later days. The fact is that he was not a Byron or a Keats of letter writing, nor a Boswell of interesting anecdote. The letters as a whole, even the most friendly personal ones, seem peculiarly colorless and conventional. Like so many of the late Victorians he seems obsessed with the duty to cover up the most vital human details about the literary people he has known. The obligation he felt to protect Swinburne from prying literary journalists and autograph collectors may have given him that cautiousness in his letters, but more probably it was part of his native reserve and commonplace sentimental temperament.

Nevertheless, out of the perusal of these letters does emerge a picture of a period: little side lights on its literary ethics, on the tastes of the times, on the literary activities and judgments of half a century past, on the home life and habits of Swinburne. Though the last is much too meager and guarded and lacking in detail, it is possible to glean some knowledge of how carefully Watts-Dunton protected his friend from the world without the closely guarded sanctuary of "The Pines," as well as how he watched over Swinburne's literary and financial interests.

Watts-Dunton's contacts before he settled at Putney had not been narrow. He had been intimate with some of the most famous and most original literary characters of half a century, and through his

friendship with R. H. Horne, the friend of Elizabeth Barrett, who had seen Keats in a poetic study on his apothecary's wagon, and with Trelawny, who had been the daily companion of Byron and Shelley, his literary reminiscences spanned almost a century. Born in 1832, he spent his childhood in St. Ives, went to Cambridge, and later became a solicitor. But the itch to write had attacked him early. His first literary enthusiasm had been for George Borrow, whose stories of gypsy life no doubt encouraged his own study of Romany lore that led to the composition of his novel *Aylwin* and his poem *The Coming of Love*. Through a chance acquaintance with Gordon Hake, then an intimate friend of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, he met Rossetti in 1872 and was soon on terms of the closest friendship with him, ingratiating himself first by extricating the poet-painter from some legal embarrassment. Through Rossetti he met William Morris, Burne-Jones, and the whole Pre-Raphaelite circle. He soon made himself indispensable to Swinburne as he had to Rossetti by his useful and friendly services in a business capacity, but they found him also a brilliant conversationalist and a congenial companion. For a while he was associated with the eccentric painter James McNeill Whistler in the publication of a short-lived periodical called *Piccadilly*. He had become such a diner-out that Whistler called him "Watts the worldling." At one of Whistler's famous Sunday breakfasts he spotted the young Oscar Wilde charming all the guests and was perspicacious enough to predict that Wilde would soon conquer London by his wit.

Watts began his writing career by doing critiques for the *Examiner* under William Minto in 1874, and two years later had attracted so much attention that Norman MacColl, editor of the *Athenaeum*, then the leading literary journal, persuaded him to join the reviewing staff, and thenceforth until almost the end of the century he reviewed most of the important volumes of poetry that appeared in England and America. Though all his reviews were anonymous, his style was recognized and his prestige grew so that when James Russell Lowell came to England as Minister of the United States to the Court of St. James he sought out Watts at a party and told him he had read all his critiques and was greatly impressed by them, and they subsequently became close friends. Watts was also on dining intimacy with Browning and Tennyson.

When Watts took Swinburne to share his bachelor quarters at "The

Pines" in 1879 he was a more familiar figure in social-literary circles than the "fleshly poet," who had more bohemian tastes, had ever been. For some years Watts kept up his London contacts, while sheltering Swinburne from low companions. Watts still spent much time with Rossetti, who had come to be dependent on him and called him "a hero of friendship," and when the poet-painter died in 1882 he was by his side. Rossetti had expressed the wish that Watts would write his biography if his brother didn't. But by the period of the correspondence in the letter books, Watts, then past sixty, except for an occasional trip to the theatre or to the sea coast with Swinburne in the summer, preferred to confine his social life to Putney, where he invited selected guests to tea or dinner to meet the great poet whom he displayed charily to choice spirits. He spent an increasing amount of his time in looking after Swinburne's health, his financial and business affairs, and superintending his publications.

Watts-Dunton's volume of poems called *The Coming of Love* was withheld from publication for many years, partly because of the author's sensitivity to criticism. In fact, William Morris had offered to print a limited edition on the Kelmscott Press, but Watts had not the temerity to venture before the public then and let the opportunity pass. And when his novel *Aylwin* finally appeared in 1898 (also after a twenty-year period of rewriting and tinkering) he was immediately upset by criticism and ascribed any unfavorable review to hostile motives. In some critical appraisal of W. E. Henley he had run foul of that sharp-tongued critic, and he believed the notice in the *Outlook* to come from "Henley's Satellites." In a letter to Mr. Dodd, the American publisher, recorded in one of the letter books from "The Pines," he wrote (February 11, 1899), concerning a slating in an American periodical called *The Critic*:

"I was aware that the Critic (for some inscrutable reason or another) is the bitterest foe that I have in America. . . . But what I did not know till now was that the editor of the *Critic* is a lady—Miss Gilder—I am told. And this I confess rather irks me (for she is I fancy a near relative of one of your American poets whose verses have given me much pleasure—Richard Watson Gilder).

"That there is some strong personal pique at the bottom of it is very manifest, and I fear that the *Athenaeum* (for whose sins your country men will persist in holding me liable) has been unjust to R.W.G. on some occasion or other.

"Perhaps however as Mr. Burroughs [John Burroughs, who had published *Whitman: a Study* in 1896] is a contributor to the *Critic* the inspiration of aught against me has come from that source. Some years ago my morbid and somewhat puritanical dislike 'of the nasty' in literature impelled me, certainly to the use of over-angry words about the more unsavoury parts of Walt Whitman's writing, and Mr. Burroughs has been cherishing against me ever since an animosity which time does not seem to appease."

Some of the more interesting letters in the collection, however, are those in which Watts-Dunton is seen as the go-between for Swinburne, sometimes as the mid-wife trying to deliver contributions from him to friends' periodicals, but more often keeping a strict eye on biographical or critical works on his literary lion. On November 6, 1900, he wrote to C. Kinlock Cooke, who had solicited a poem from Swinburne through Watts:

"I have spoken to Mr. Swinburne on the subject you named to me. As I expected, he would feel great pleasure in writing a poem on some imperial subject, should the inspiration come to him. But that is always with him the difficulty. I have known him emphatically decline to write on a subject under the full impression that he could not rise to an occasion & immediately sit down & write a fine poem."

And on April 1, 1901, he wrote to Swinburne's sister Alice:

"Of course Miss Wood's article is charming and very clever. She seems to have made one or two slips, but that was inevitable in such circumstances. I was glad to see her saying so much in favour of Swinburne's last tragedy [*Rosamund, Queen of the Lombards*, published in 1899], for the subject was as difficult as it was risky, in fact I regretted his taking it up at all. I am, however, proverbially super-sensitive upon matters of the kind in literature. A. rather winced at the story of the Eton bullying, but he soon got over it." Watts asked for two copies of the *Criterion* in which the article had appeared.

When Frank Harris, who had just started editing *The Candid Friend*, appealed to Watts-Dunton, through his sub-editor Henry Blauchamp, for some biographical facts on Swinburne, the reply stifled any hopes that literary gossip may have had. Watts-Dunton wrote (March 24, 1901):

"I am sorry to say that your last suggestion is distinctly more impracticable than your first. If you knew Mr. Swinburne you would realize how absolutely impossible it is to hope to get from him a

written record such as that you suggest. He would be amazed at such a thing being proposed for every one knows that he systematically refuses to furnish material to the biographical dictionaries. I have the greatest wish to oblige my old friend Frank Harris, and you know how greatly I admire his literary work. But it would not be kind to him to let him suppose for a moment that I can do what is hopelessly impossible."

When Arthur Waugh showed Watts-Dunton an article on Swinburne which he had prepared for the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (probably the tenth edition—Edmund Gosse wrote that in the eleventh), Swinburne's protector came down on him heavily for his strictures on the critical judgments of the poet. He wrote Waugh on May 23, 1901:

"After making every allowance, however, for Swinburne's excess of emphasis in the expression of his judgments upon various matters, I cannot but think that you sometimes speak of him as a critic with a disparagement and even a contempt that are not warranted by a fair examination of his writings. To say that he has written some of the most uncritical prose 'to be found in the whole body of English literature' is surely to be somewhat uncritical oneself.

"And as to his self-contradictions—the time is not yet come to decide the question as to how much & how little of self-contradiction is to be found in Swinburne's critical writings, as, often, the self-contradiction is on the surface only. What you say about Swinburne's 'alternately lauding & vilifying Walt Whitman' is not true. It is a fact that he began by lauding him & ended by condemning him, but there has been at present no 'alternation,' nor do I think there will be. And the word 'vilify' seems to be scarcely the word to be used about so important a writer in so sober an organ as the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, especially when speaking of a living gentleman. This is the kind of language one expects to see in irresponsible prints such as the late 'Scots' Observer' that has worked so much mischief among our young writers. The truth is that W. B. Scott and, I fancy, William Rossetti, looked upon America (which has since turned out to be the country of oil trusts & wealth-worship) as the promised land of free thought & great ideas, and they accepted the harlequinading of Whitman as being something new in form (forgetting altogether the great authors of 'The Lily & the Bee' & the 'Proverbial Philos-

ophy')¹ and as new in its preachment of *camaraderie*, forgetting altogether the French socialists & free thinkers. They introduced to Swinburne two or three of Whitman's best things (which really are worthy work although not poems) such as 'My Captain' & c; and as at that time Swinburne hailed everything that savoured of revolt, he took for granted that Walt Whitman was a new voice in America, & wrote those fine verses about him. It was these verses that led a whole generation of English writers to accept Whitman not only as a poet, but as the greatest poet of the age; but it was not until years afterwards that Swinburne really looked into Whitman's writings, and then he turned with his usual violence in disgust away from the affectations & the quackery mixed up with the undoubted raw material of poetry to be found in 'Leaves of Grass' & c. But I believe that at the present moment he has as much sympathetic appreciation of what is really worthy in Whitman as he ever had. I do not say this because I myself resent the influence of Walt Whitman upon the less original of our young writers, turning them away from poetic art & from the spiritual side of love and indeed making them confound love with the grossest forms of animal desire. I say it because I think that it is the fashion to be extremely unjust towards Swinburne on account of Walt Whitman. But whether I am right or wrong, I think that such a word as vilifying is in the wrong place in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in so important an article written by such a critic as yourself.

"Perhaps, however, upon the subject of Walt Whitman—the most intentionally gross writer that has ever appeared in English literature, if we consider that his main object is to identify the appetites of the brutes with the human passion of love—I am myself a biased critic. The only two books I have published are pictures of the spiritual side of love, and these are intended as direct protests against

¹ Samuel Warren (1807-1877), best known for his novel called *Ten Thousand a Year* (1839), published *The Lily and the Bee* in 1851 to celebrate the Great Exhibition. He described it as "a Lyrical Soliloquy supposed to be the meditative utterance of a devout Poet-Philosopher musing under the guidance of an attendant Spirit, first by day, and then by night, in the Crystal Palace of 1851." He said it was "written chiefly in rhythmical prose." *Proverbial Philosophy*, published in 1838, was a compound of pious platitudes in doggerel free verse by Martin Farquhar Tupper (1810-1889). It had a phenomenal popularity in the Victorian period, going into 900 editions before the end of the century. Watts-Dunton's admiration for these books is a measure of the Mid-Victorian limitations of his literary judgments.

the revived animalism of our time brought about by Walt Whitman. . . .”

It is not difficult to surmise from this that Watts-Dunton stood out against realism and naturalism in literature, as his own critical essays in the *Athenaeum* and elsewhere attest. There was something too bland in his critical creed to make his reviews really penetrating. He deprecated what it was customary to call “fault-finding” and sought for the “beauties” and the “greatness” that shone through the “blemishes.” He had ceased to write for the *Athenaeum* after about 1898, and when Vernon Rendall succeeded Norman MacColl as editor, he found Watts-Dunton out of step with the times and thought him overrated. In his D. N. B. article on Watts Rendall pronounced his review articles in the *Athenaeum* “clogged with wise saws and ancient instances,” and their profundity, he said, was exaggerated. Moreover, despite the supposed independence of the journal for which he wrote, Watts was not above the “friendly review.” Even his secretary and sympathetic biographer, Thomas Hake, says: “In a large number of his *Athenaeum* essays, loyalty to his many friends often blurred the sharp contour of his critical judgment.”

Watts had never understood or sympathized with the guard which MacColl, following the spartan principles of independence of the elder Dilke, kept over the anonymity of his reviewers in the *Athenaeum*. The editor realized that the “friendly review” was the greatest enemy of independent criticism. Watts later complained that though his influence had been great as a reviewer, he had never had much to say about the conduct of the paper. To Newman Howard, who has written to inquire about a review in the *Athenaeum*, Watts-Dunton replied (November 19, 1901):

“I despair of making people understand that I had not at any time as much knowledge as to what was going on in that journal as the printer’s devil had. Of course I must needs have had an indirect influence because I contributed the most important articles; but MacColl was the most reticent of all editors, trained on the old principles of sacred anonymity. Delane of the *Times* was nothing to him in that regard. If by chance I ever asked him the name of a writer of an article that interested me he never told me.” And Watts complained that “an abject creature of Henley’s” had become a regular reviewer.

Two years later he was writing to Edmund Gosse (July 23, 1903)

that "Henley's henchmen . . . are affirming that Henley invented our friend George Meredith. . . . [It is] an insult to men like Swinburne whose *Spectator* letter in support of Meredith has become so famous and to all of us who have been preaching up Meredith for a quarter of a century."

During the early months of 1903 Watts-Dunton was writing an essay on the Romantic Movement which he called "The Renascence of Wonder" (a much touted essay which was later reprinted) for *Chambers Encyclopedia of English Literature*, and there is much correspondence with the editor, Dr. Patrick. For the same encyclopedia he wrote articles on Borrow and Byron. Of the latter he wrote proudly to Dr. Patrick (June 30, 1903): "Mr. Swinburne declares that it is the most vital picture of Byron extant."

On October 20 of this same year Watts-Dunton wrote to William Dana Orcutt of the University Press, Cambridge, U.S.A., concerning some Shakespeare essays of his own and Swinburne's which were being printed in America: "And as to Mr. Swinburne I need not remind you that £20 is an absurd price to pay to the greatest Shakespearean in the world for the preliminary use of his article on Pericles."

Although he was proud to have the great writer to display, Watts-Dunton sometimes felt a little embarrassed when called on to furnish critical or biographical information on his friend. Asked by Wilfred Whitten, editor of *T. P.'s Weekly*, to contribute an article on Swinburne's new volume of poems, which he had largely seen through the press, he replied (February 3, 1904): "But for the reason that Mr. Swinburne is, though an intimate friend of mine, a very illustrious writer—the most illustrious, perhaps, of our time—while I am a very obscure one and am content to remain so, I must leave to others the pleasant task of writing about him, as I left to others the pleasant task of writing about Rossetti and William Morris, with whom I was also on terms of affection." He recommended Ernest Rhys and James Douglas. The latter, a young admirer of Watts-Dunton, wrote a book on his patron, published that same year, which reeked with flattery and adulation.

One of Watts-Dunton's self-appointed tasks was to protect Swinburne from autograph collectors. To a Mrs. Craigie he wrote on March 30, 1904: "Swinburne's dislike of autographing books may not be quite so acute as was Tennyson's, but it is pretty strong never-

theless; and no wonder seeing that he is now the chief victim of the autograph collector, and has, on the average, about five such applications as this every week of his life, four of which, I fancy, hail from the greatest republic under the sun."

To authors of the present day, used to public autographing of their volumes, the sensitivities of Swinburne and Watts-Dunton must seem strange and quaint. Clarence McIlvaine, the London representative of the American publishers Harper & Brothers, had asked Watts-Dunton whether he might plan an autographed large paper edition of Swinburne's poems. The poet's friend replied: "When Mr. Chatto decided to bring out an English edition de luxe of 100 copies he said that he would not suggest an autographed edition because in this country for so eminent a poet as Mr. Swinburne to write his autograph upon books for sale would be considered *infra dig.* & I entirely agreed with him. I never mentioned the matter to Mr. Swinburne because I know with what energy he would reject the idea. I am sorry not to be able to oblige you in this matter, but there are as you are aware, certain points of authorial delicacy in which England and America are not at one."

Watts-Dunton loved the theatre, but did not go so often as he might have in later years since Swinburne was too deaf to enjoy it, and he himself could see little unless he was seated in one of the front rows. Max Beerbohm sometimes sent him tickets for performances at the theatre of his brother, Sir Herbert Beerbohm-Tree. In thanking William Archer and Professor Gilbert Murray for an invitation to the theatre he wrote Archer on May 22, 1904; that Swinburne's deafness had for some years prevented him from going to plays. "Some years ago when our friend Beerbohm Tree first produced 'The Merry Wives of Windsor' I regretted it, for the straining to listen brought on a painful singing in the ears which lasted for some days, and yet he did not hear a word."

It is interesting to note that the typewriter was just beginning to come into general use by writers. Watts-Dunton was in correspondence with a number of typewriter companies in 1904. After trying out several makes, he finally selected a Blickensderfer machine, finding it superior to the Hammond.

The white light of publicity that was being thrown on writers by the extensive use of photographs in literary journals at the turn of the century was disturbing to the two friends at "The Pines." Refus-

ing to sit for a photographer for *The Academy*, to whose editor Watts-Dunton wrote on June 19, 1904, he added: "Mr. Swinburne wished me to say the same for him. On several, never to be forgotten, occasions, he and I have been unwilling victims of the photographic art—an art, which, when exercised at 'The Pines' lends itself to melancholy results. The consequences is that for a long time we have both refused steadfastly & repeatedly to sit again."

It is a curious paradox that Watts-Dunton, so out of tune with so many contemporary trends in literature and life, should have been more interested in and more encouraging to some of the younger writers. In thanking H. G. Wells for sending a copy of his *Food of the Gods* in October, 1904, he said: "I do not know any writer of our time whose originality is so unmistakable as yours." But to Dr. Richard Garnett he wrote on October 19; apropos of his book on Coleridge: "It is charming—perfect, save for one grave omission, the omission of any reference to the greatest of all students of Coleridge—Algernon Charles Swinburne. . . . Surely, they [your selections] *cannot* be better than Swinburne's selection, made 30 years ago, & prefaced by his splendid appreciation of Coleridge. This appears in his 'Essays and Studies.'"

Of Swinburne's home life at "The Pines" Watts-Dunton does give a few glimpses in the letter books. After thanking Hall Caine for his novel *The Prodigal Son* and saying that he has to conserve his eyesight, he adds (October 20, 1904): "Swinburne is kind enough to read my novels out to me in the evening, & it is really a very charming way for two old cronies to spend their evenings. He has lately read to me several of my beloved Waverley Novels, & several of Charles Reade's & Dickens' Wilkie Collins & Lytton's stories some of which I had not read before. . . . At the present moment we are in 'Tom Jones' In order thoroughly to enjoy the luxury of passing into the 18th Century, he has bought 1st editions of *Tom Jones*, *Amelia*, etc., at a very considerable outlay as it seems to me."

And on May 16, 1905, he wrote to Swinburne's sister Isabel concerning her brother's cold: "We have kept him in his room so that he should not run any risks by his carelessness when out for his walk. Sufficient clothing he will not wear, and runs many risks that I do not run. . . . Miss R. [Clara Reich, whom Watts-Dunton at the age of 73 married in November of that year—she was 20] and Algernon

and I have had some delightful days in the reading-room at the British Museum."

On November 16, 1904, Watts-Dunton wrote to George Meredith concerning a "ghastly outrage," an article in the *Daily Mail* referring to the famous episode of Rossetti's having dug up his poems after they had been buried with his wife. "Through Gabriel I was thrown into contact with the man [the author of the article]," he wrote, "& now much regret it. He has built his success upon booming himself in connection with Rossetti. The allusion to a poet & critic who wrote & reprimanded him, is, of course, to me. Is the sacrilege to be exploited behind the footlights? That is what I want to know, & he has not answered me—the idea of the tragic incident being put upon the stage is almost unthinkable, & yet it promises to be only too true. Of course Swinburne is as indignant as I am. . . ."

Watts-Dunton protested to Clement Shorter, then editor of *The Sphere*, an illustrated literary paper, that the success of *Aylwin* was not due mainly to reviews of his friends. "Knowing that I was at the time the *âme damnée* of the Athenaeum," he wrote (December 20, 1905), "I expected attacks and not laudations. It was [not] till one day last year that a charming lady, on being introduced to me, told me that it was she who wrote the most enthusiastic review of the book that appeared; & so reticent a man was our dear MacColl—so sacred did he consider the law of anonymity in an anonymous journal that he refused to tell me who reviewed the book in the Athenaeum, and to this day I do not know."

The romantic-sentimental preferences of Watts-Dunton and the gulf that separated him from the contemporary world and from the fresher literary movements and critical views of the new century are indicated in some of the later letters in the books from "The Pines." He wrote to E. V. Lucas on October 29, 1906:

"I am afraid that the romance of Christmas is fading away year by year. I find that but very few people take anything like the interest in Christmas rejoicings that we used to take when I was young, & that I for my part, still take, & shall always take. It was the delightful descriptions of Christmas in Washington Irving's 'Sketch Book' that first filled me with the poetry of Christmas. . . . Charles Dickens got his Christmas inspiration from the same source. But beautiful as his Christmas pictures are, I have never got quite so much delight from them as I got from Irving. . . . As to Christmas in London,

the Philistine vulgarity of the smart restaurant during Christmas tide has all the attractions for the softer sex that the family hearth used to have."

And on November 29 of the same year he wrote to G. W. Prothero, editor of the *Quarterly Review*, who had asked him to do an article on Blake: "Between ourselves, even if I were free, I don't know that I should care to write about Blake. The marvelous way in which the human sheep of the critic species follow each other is seen more prominently in the case of Blake than in that of almost any other writer. Because Rossetti got Blake on the brain & transmitted the ailment to one or two other men of genius [including Swinburne] it is all 'Blake', 'Blake', 'Blake' now, until one is sick of hearing the name of Blake. Tell it not in Gath, but the older I get the more am I overwhelmed by the flabby imbecility of the human mind when confronted with poetry. Of course Blake wrote a few divine lyrics (inspired, mark you, by the Elizabethan lyrics); but how few they are! And how 'madder' than the maddest hatter the man was!"

And to the popular novelist F. Marion Crawford he wrote on May 7, 1907, to thank him for a novel which he said appealed to him more profoundly than the work of any other contemporaries. "It is my misfortune," he added, "to be living at a time when the beautiful in art & poetry seems really to be no longer the general quest—when, as I have said in print, the ugly is sought for by so many of the workers in our imaginative literature. Of course I do not include the novels of my dear old friend George Meredith, or the poems of Mr. Swinburne."

In spite of their general dryness these letter books from the famous old house in Putney do evoke curious recollections of a literary era that is just past and therefore in some respects more dead than those of a remoter time. Watts-Dunton lived on at "The Pines" for five years after his more famous companion's death in 1909. Before he passed on, the noted collector-forgery T. J. Wise swept down on Putney and carried away in a taxi most of the literary papers and letters of Swinburne, and Wise also acquired later the bulk of Watts-Dunton's manuscripts, including the letter books which have now come to Rutgers.