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Arthur Shearly Cripps: An Assessment

D. E. Borrell*

In the nave of his ruined mission church eight miles from Enkeldoorn lies the body of Arthur Shearly Cripps, priest, poet, novelist, pamphleteer, politician of sorts, visionary, or crank as some have called him. Today, seventeen years after his death, a hundred years after his birth, he is more a figure of controversy than ever. Ordinary Rhodesians are struggling to find their way politically and morally in a time of confusion, double-talk, sliding values. On moral, social and political issues Cripps speaks out in his poems and in his life with an uncompromising honesty that makes lesser mortals uncomfortable. Although this awkward, stubborn intellectual who was clumsy and painfully shy, never resolved his own personal struggles with inadequacy, homesickness and loneliness, he had resolved his ethical and religious problems by the time he left England for Mashonaland in 1901. For him, those issues were simple: in the steps of St. Francis, prompted by the social conscience of the Christian Socialists and the vision of "Lux Mundi", one served the humblest and the poorest one could find:

... see in outward sign
The thing worth living for in this harsh world —
To feel our fellows' sorrows as our own;
Achieve a Passion and attain a Cross,
As finding there that rose-crown of our life —
Crown full as sweet in flow'r as sharp in thorns —
Love, and of loves, the greatest love of all
That lays a life down gladly for its friends.

Those lines occur first in his volume *Titania and Other Poems* (1900), in a poem significantly written on "The Death of St. Francis". Cripps never changed in his views. When he died at 83,

in Enkeldoorn hospital, he had given all his private income away and his body was scarred by the enormous privations he inflicted on himself trekking vast distances to conduct his ministry. He left behind a considerable body of verse, some novels and pamphlets, three churches built by his own hands, a Dame School, a lazaretto, and a large number of devoted Africans settled on their own farms on land he had given them. They gave him the funeral of a chief, and his grave is still tended today by the Africans at Maronda Mashanu, his own mission. If perhaps they never quite understood him, they have never forgotten the priest they called "One-who-helps-you-to-carry-the-load".

Just as Cripps had decided the course of his life and the principles he believed in by 1901 and was still following them at the end of his life with uncompromising devotion, so too his poetry had found its form and diction by the time he left Oxford in 1891. He was in the habit of reprinting earlier work alongside new work in his latest volume. He wrote prolifically on occasional subjects and sent verses to everyone at Christmas time, Easter or on birthdays. However, you are just as likely to find that he sent a poem written in 1903 to someone in 1941. His friend, Frank Lloyd also frequently uses older ones for Christmas cards; and when you have traced them back to source, you can see absolutely no difference in style between early poems and late. There is some

*Zambezia is happy to include this tribute by the well known Rhodesian poet D. E. Borrell (Betty Finn), on the occasion of the centenary of the birth of Arthur Shearly Cripps.

falling off in his later years after his blindness, but that is all.

The explanation is that all his life Cripps was content to use traditional forms and traditional English. It was not that Cripps, in his isolation on a mission, had never heard of the work of the poets in the 1930s. The truth is that Cripps turned his back on the developments in poetry in the same way he refused to recognise the impact of the twentieth century on Africa. He began his creative life in the doldrums of English poetry, after the death of Tennyson and before the Georgians. At Oxford people were reading the *Yellow Book* and the minor melancholies of Ernest Dowson and Austin Dobson. For this generation the stilted "Tis" and "Twere" of poetic diction were standard practice and unquestionable. Cripps used them all his life. They are sometimes incompatible with the subject of African life but the surprising thing is that they are not more so. It is as if Cripps' own personality imposes a oneness on the harsh dissident elements. In "To the Veld" for example, after two good opening lines we get the ludicrous comparison:

Stage-carpet, foil for all that's fair!

Also alien words like "faëry-fine", "o'er" and "nay" are used, yet the poem ascends in a kind of agony to the last magnificent declaration of Cripps' own cry of courage, and despair, and love of the harsh veld:

Nay most for all they weariness --
The homeless void, the endless track,
Noon-thirst, the wintry night's distress --
For all tense stretchings on the rack --
That gave me my lost manhood back.

It is this transmutation of unlikely elements, I think, which made John Buchan assert in his prefatory note to Cripps' last volume *Africa: Verses* that "he cunningly adapted it [poetic tradition] to the needs of a new land". However, Cripps never attempts to experiment with the rhythms of the African dance, for example, nor does he really convey the violences and extremes of Africa in sound or technique, although he deals with drought and flood, famine and feast. The movements of the labourers in the field, the shrilling of the women, the shapes and colours of the bush are rather the background of the central action: the deep spiritual movements of the poet himself. Thus the harshness of the track becomes a symbol of pilgrimage. In "The Way in Africa" it is used for the conclusions it forces upon the poet:

Great gold vleis, and granite hills
So far and blue, she'd have me see,
But underfoot her deep sand sigh'd,
'Better is yet to be'.

The hardships of the way are repeatedly identified with those Christ suffered and become the mystical way to Cripps' spiritual destiny:

Now go, a veldsore in each lifted hand,
Go with two blistered feet your altar's way,
With pity's wound at heart, go, praise and pray!
Go, wounds to Wounds! Why you are glad today
He, whose Five Wounds you wear, will understand.

The failure of the mealie crop becomes a symbol of the stoicism Cripps fought to attain; the toiling natives and the village dance represent to Cripps the unspoilt Arcadia he tried vainly to defend from the encroachments of civilisation.

Cripps is not an originator. We do not go to his poetry for something new in literature, a blending of two cultures in some miraculous manner. Even his political and religious views were derived from the great leaders of the Christian Socialist movement he knew at Oxford: men like Charles Gore, Francis Paget and Father Benson. But surely no one lived out the principles of Christian Socialism so faithfully and so literally as Cripps? It is true, too, that however closely Cripps lived to the Africans, he remains in his poetry an English clergyman whose poetic leanings are to Vaughan and Traherne, Keats and Tennyson, to the Greek poets he imitated as a boy at Charterhouse and on whose Arcadia he modelled his Africa. The exquisite lines from "Epiphany":

Nay, not gold
At his crib I hold:
Base metal is my heart, and bare my hand . . .

are pure Herbert, just as his early "Pilgrimage of Grace" is pure Keats. They are not imitations so much as re-creations of the forms and sound he loved. So too he loved the English of the Bible. He wrote to Buchan and knew several contemporary poets; Edmund Blunden and Laurence Binyon were close friends. While at Oxford he had published an anthology of poetry with Binyon, Stephen Phillips and the Indian poet Manmohan Ghose. Noel Brettell, the Rhodesian poet, used to ride over on horseback to see him in his later years and he recalls that they "read everything from Chaucer to Gilbert Murray's translations". It was mostly reading, very little talk. This was because Cripps did not seem interested in discussing theories of poetry. He had already made up his mind, as on so many things! However, in his preface to John Snelling's anthology of Rhodesian verse Cripps does give us one glimpse of his literary views. He first admits that he owes most to the Bible and to Theocritus, but by this he seems simply to mean that they have helped him spiritually "to see the sacredness and

beauty around me in African life." In regard to poetry itself, he continued:

Also (I write as it were with a deep sigh of relief), I am glad to say that Verse as represented in this Anthology means verse in the English Traditional sense (Victorian? or Edwardian? or Pre-War Georgian? or Neo-Caroline?) not Verse in any Post-War Anti-Traditional (Eliotesque? or Surrealistic) sense. The worst that might truthfully be said, I would hazard a guess, of the characteristic poetic diction of this Anthology would not be so very bad after all, no worse than what was said of the 'lingo' of certain nineteenth century verse writers — 'It was imitative and sapless, but not preposterous.'¹

This is a fascinating glimpse of Cripps. He is all there: curious punctuation, prejudices, forthrightness and all. It shows clearly that Cripps did not understand the new school of poetry — or was not interested in it. Noel Brettell comments that in any case, W. H. Auden's brittle drawing-room wit seemed ludicrously inept in Cripps' little rondavel under immense euphorbias. Tennyson came off much better, as if his "bleached pageantry" matched the huge canvas of Africa, the gentlemanly sentiments, the morality of Cripps, a natural gentleman, despite his outspoken views. In his poetry as in his life, Cripps struggled for simplicity, not newness. The traditional forms and vocabulary would do. In a 1941 poem still in manuscript, he indulges in an analysis of his literary tastes. It is the only occasion he does so in poetry:

'O, what a power has white simplicity'
Wrote Keats, and sang so simply and so well —
Keeping the time, a never-jangled bell —
Pouring his full heart forth as limpidly
As lark in sky, or nightingale on tree —
Telling with beauty what Truth bade him tell —
Ringing with rapture of regret a knell!
Ere yet they ended too his youth and glee.

Poets of Airly Beacon, Bredon Hill,
Poets of Uphill Road or Bridge of Sighs,
Poets, whom 'tis a fashion to despise,
Your white simplicity endears you still.
For charm of sound, for clear-as-crystal sense
My soothed heart's homage take in recompense.

A touching and graceful sonnet; however, simplicity and sweetness did not usually come easily to Cripps. As Mr. Brettell remarks: "His verse often has a tongue-tied awkwardness . . . It was as though the vehemence of his motives, his indignation, his bitter self-castigation, his savage charity, twisted and writhed inside the outworn idiom he had inherited." His satirical verse is particularly

prone to lapses. So often it is mere vituperation. He could not discipline his anger. That is why he never took up the cause of the African in Parliament: "I have too many complexes about the Native." Yet poems like "To My Carriers" and "No Thoroughfare" remain among the best calls to justice in the literature of this part of the world.

No one would claim Cripps was a great poet. He wrote too much, too uncritically for that. Unlike Wordsworth, whom he much resembles, he has no great poetical revolution to effect. Undoubtedly, however, there are moments of greatness. Perhaps this is the lot of the minor poet. He has a note of his own, even if the range is limited. The note derives from the spirit of the man rather than his style. If, like Milton, Cripps defended the Right of the Common Man in a manner that was, paradoxically enough, downright intolerant, it is the same passion and agony which transmutes such poems as "Stigmata Amoris" and "Ascription" to pure gold. Like Wordsworth too, Cripps lacked a sense of humour and the sense of proportion that it implies. He perpetrates absurdities like the image of African angels:

Flapping their flight wings
Of russet-brown feathers.

Milton however did the same. Angels seem to be their downfall! Reformers and saints are like that. If they have a strong sense of proportion can they set themselves their impossible goals? Some call Cripps a saint. If he had not lacked our ordinary sense of proportion, the magnitude of his mission would have overwhelmed him. Mr. Brettell says that Cripps could not have then attempted to live according to his strict Franciscan code of self-denial without the protection of the cloisters. We can smile at the eccentricity, but the courage of the man must win our admiration. Cripps was perhaps not a very successful missionary; his churches lie in ruins; the British South Africa Police said that his lands were so full of skellums that even the dogs were trained to hide! Most of the causes he espoused have become things of the past, but the principles he fought for have taken on a new relevance. Was he a poet worthy of so much attention? Cripps would have been flattered but I fancy he would have reminded us that, for him, his talents came in the following order: priest, missionary, man, poet.

REFERENCE

1. SNELLING, J. 1938 *Rhodesian Verse, 1888-1938*. Oxford, Blackwell.

