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**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

A. S. G. Edwards, Peter Mendes, and John Stokes,  
*Ian Fletcher, Poet and Scholar: A List of His Publications*  
(Nottingham: Shoestring Press, 2019),  
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It must have been the autumn of 1973 that I first met Ian Fletcher. Evening was coming on and we were both giving papers at a Pater or Beardsley conference in Brasenose College, Oxford. As we crossed one of the inner quadrangles on our way to the lecture theatre this tall, gaunt man bent over me, said: 'I won't be a minute', and disappeared into the door which led to the college chapel. I waited a few moments and he emerged murmuring to me, 'That should be all right then.' It was clear that he had been consulting the ghost of Pater about his forthcoming piece and had received a blessing from the other side. He hardly needed it for as soon as he began to speak my jaw dropped in wonder at such eloquence. Beardsley, he told his audience,

decomposed the materials of the objective world and recomposed them into an ideal geography of his own devisal. And all this was accomplished with an icy fire of consciousness, a cold intensity that appears at first antithetical to the sensational, even melodramatic features of much of his art, and to the frenetic quest for all that can be clutched and held and possessed by one who was continuously in a state of physical dissolution.

Is this the man, I asked myself, who had been plucked from a children's library by the Renaissance scholar, Donald Gordon, and installed with almost no qualifications into the academic ranks of a university? I had just arrived in Oxford as a junior research fellow and knew very little about this remarkable man, but the acquaintance was to grow when I joined the English Department in Reading several years later.

At Reading Ian Fletcher was a force of nature. His booming voice resonated down the corridors striking a mixture of fear and awe into the growing cohort of feminist lecturers that the department was beginning to employ, for Ian was a man of the old school with few feminist sympathies. But as the Doyen of the Decadence his reputation was international. Our interests

overlapped: Pater, Ruskin, and Rossetti. We jointly taught on a Master's degree which he had founded some years previously dealing with literature and the visual arts in the long nineteenth century. But Ian did not tolerate fools, and with a capacious mind, a vast reference field in the classics, and a startling knowledge of the intimate details of life in the late nineteenth century, it was not difficult to feel both foolish and ignorant in his presence. Seminar teaching with him was not always easy. Once on a roll his attention was hard to secure or deflect, but I found a key to insert not just a word but sometimes a whole paragraph into his perorations: 'No, I think you are wrong there Ian', brought the billions of neurons firing in his brain to a sudden and startled standstill.

A little before I arrived in Reading, Ian together with Donald Gordon had achieved a considerable coup in the critical world of W. B. Yeats. The 1960s and 1970s were golden ones in work on Yeats. Richard Ellmann, Giorgio Melchiori, Jon Stallworthy, Curtis Bradford, and others had unfolded many of the mysteries of Yeats's poetry, prose, and drama, but in principally literary terms. In 1957 and again in 1961 Gordon and Fletcher turned their attention to Yeats's image-making propensity and to the numerous sources of visual imagery that influenced his work. This interdisciplinary approach was extremely novel at the time, and those who worked in both word and image tended to be dismissed as dilettantes. But they were joined in their endeavour by Frank Kermode who had worked for some time at Reading University before leaving for University College London. By this time Fletcher's reputation as a critic of the Decadence had already been established by an edition of the poems of Lionel Johnson in 1953 and this was extended into a gathering of a number of essays entitled *W. B. Yeats and His Contemporaries* which emerged in its final form in 1987. Eleven brilliant essays over three decades on John Gray, Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symons, Bedford Park, and above all the presiding genius of W. B. Yeats. This was Fletcher's characteristic mode. Short, sharp, and insightful. He published few monographs. A small study of Walter Pater in 1959 and another on Swinburne in 1973. He wrote a more substantial book on Aubrey Beardsley in 1987 and another on Herbert Horne in 1990. But this was not where

his strength lay. His mind worked in flashes of genius and his list of publications reveals the breadth, energy, and imaginative curiosity of this man with whom I worked for several years. His remarkable command of the language was evident over lunch in the Senior Common Room, his scholarship dazzled (perhaps even blinded) some of his undergraduates, but few of his colleagues were aware of the sheer range of his learning, his passion for the abstruse ways of scholarship, and the sharpness of his focus on the minutiae not only of the culture of the late nineteenth century but of the broader movements in the classical world throughout Europe. Probably seventy-five per cent of his publications consisted of reviews, though his passion for poetry runs like a golden thread through everything he touched. His spirit resembled that of Pope, Addison, Steel, and Hazlitt but this mode was swept to one side by the bulldozer of the Research Assessment Exercise. He came to writing with the scalpel and the rapier; the RAE prioritized the spade and a new generation of academic executives carrying the only currency that mattered – the monograph – in their briefcases.

Though the publication and the criticism of poetry runs through the entire length of Fletcher's career in the 1950s his interest was focused on the work of the seventeenth century as a kind of prelude to the *fin de siècle*. Rochester rubbed shoulders with Dowson via a shared fascination with sex and death. But in the 1960s the reviews show that Fletcher was becoming more and more fascinated with the recovery of the lost souls of the Decadence. Beginning with Pater and Wilde, Symons, Beardsley, and Johnson soon followed. But Yeats is the *éminence grise* behind them all with a magnificent and ground-breaking essay from Ian on 'Leda and the Swan' which takes as its starting point Yeats's decision to open his edition of the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* with a passage from Pater's essay on Leonardo da Vinci.

The items that go to make up this bibliography are astonishing in their variety: 'The Mutations of Eros' (1955); 'Leda and St Anne' (1957); 'Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusaë*' (1963); a translation of Battista Guarini (1949); a translation of Alfonso de Ledesma (1950); 'The Protestant Cemetery, Tripoli' (1945). Fletcher existed in a rarefied atmosphere, an intellectual empyrean of

extraordinary and unusual ideas and insights. This bibliography with its generous and informative introduction by John Stokes is an act of homage, its enormous affection for Ian providing a small but permanent record of an achievement that might otherwise have been scattered to the winds. Those who knew or who worked with him felt privileged to share, however briefly, something of his remarkable mind, and it is this sense of privilege and affection that has undoubtedly led to the compilation of this bibliography.