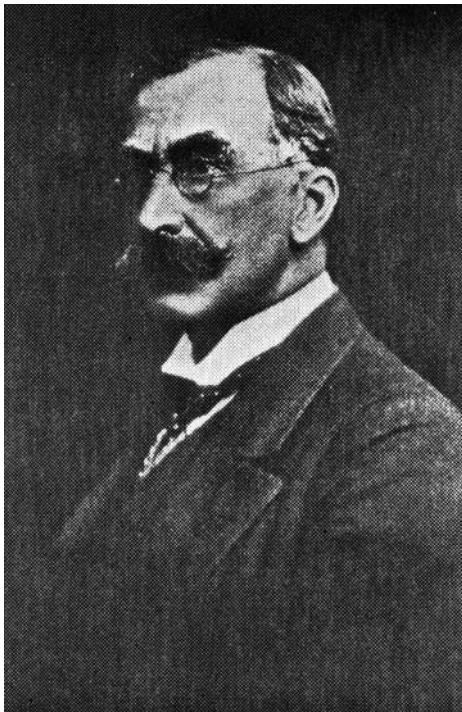


Sir Theodore Andrea Cook – sometime of Wantage

by Margaret Prentice

Theodore Cook spent his early years in Wantage after his father, Henry Cook, became the headmaster of King Alfred's School in 1868, a year after his eldest son was born. The boy was strongly influenced by both his parents and became a journalist and art critic of some renown. His knighthood he ascribed more to the Field, of which he was editor, than to his own merits.



Sir Theodore Andrea Cook

His formative years were spent with his mother, the artist Jane Elizabeth Cook, in the schoolhouse attached to the grammar school. He was a pupil there from 1876 until 1881, when he moved to his father's previous school at Exmouth to improve his Latin verses. It was the time when Henry Cook lost money in the crash of the West of England Bank, and his son then aged fourteen was faced with the prospect of becoming a clerk or winning an open scholarship at a Public School. A year later found him at Radley College, where he became head of school and captain of football and boats. Radley was followed by Wadham College, Oxford, where he took a Second Class in Honours Moderations and Classical Greats.

He began rowing seriously at Radley and continued during his time at Wadham, winning his Blue in 1889. He rowed No.3 in that year's boat race, which was won by Cambridge. He stayed in Oxford for some time after graduating and in 1891 he founded the University

Fencing Club. Fencing remained one of his keenest interests, and he captained the English Fencing Team in 1903 in Paris and again in 1906 in Athens. This expertise led to his involvement in the arrangements for the Olympic Games of 1908 in London; he was one of the three British representatives on the International Olympic Committee.

Horseracing was another of his lifelong passions, originating from his childhood in Wantage where he recalls following hounds on foot whenever possible and developing a “continual but unconscious absorption of love for the thoroughbred, from watching the strings of beautiful animals that we used to see in training on the Downs, near Letcombe, and nearer home, at Stockham.” Articles and books on horseracing were to follow, but a visit to the races was not always a pleasant occasion. He was injured during a parade of horses for the Oaks at Epsom. A mare being turned kicked him and fractured several lower ribs on his right side and a good deal of muscle was torn away. He felt the effects of this injury for the rest of his life but rarely referred to it. He had earlier lost the sight of one eye, but never let either of these disabilities interfere with his zest for action and his enthusiastic outlook on life.

Theodore Cook’s legacy from his artist mother was an early introduction to the world of paintings, sculpture and architecture. This inspired him to travel particularly in Europe and to publish authoritarian works on *Old Provence*, *Twenty-five Great Houses of France* and *Leonardo da Vinci, Sculptor* among many others.

This wide background in sport and literature led Theodore Cook into journalism. He was for some years editor of the St. James Gazette, the paper edited “for gentlemen by gentlemen”. As a freelance he wrote for the old Standard and contributed to the Daily Telegraph articles on rowing by “An Old Blue”. In 1910 he became editor of the *Field*, the County Gentleman’s Newspaper, a position he still held at the time of his death in 1928. His knighthood in 1916 was in his opinion a recognition of the work for the war effort by his magazine rather than of his own individual contribution.

When the Great War began, the proprietors and editors of all sporting papers were in a difficult position. Were the papers to be given up, to be carried on in a very much reduced form, or to be run at a loss, owing to the fall in advertising revenue? T.A.Cook and the proprietors of the *Field* chose the last alternative, provided they could make the paper of service to the country. From the outbreak of hostilities the *Field*’s leading articles were wholly devoted to national and international questions connected with the war. In February 1915 it published as a Special Supplement a detailed and illustrated account of atrocities committed by the German Armed Forces in Belgium, France, Russia and elsewhere, by land and sea. Public opinion was aroused and sufficient pressure was put upon the government to issue the Bryce Report on the subject, but this was not generally available to the public. So the *Field* took the evidence, rearranged it and using authentic photographs supplied by the Belgium and French Governments published a further supplement on the barbarity of the Germans. These were combined in one illustrated shilling pamphlet, called *The Crimes of Germany*, which was issued by the British Government in millions of copies all over the world. Within a few months the United States entered the war. This was one aspect of the magazine’s war effort which led Theodore Cook to state publicly that it was the *Field* which was being honoured by his knighthood rather than himself as editor.

Another example of Sir Theodore Cook’s war work was his involvement in the British Ambulance Committee whose aim was to provide the first motor-ambulances to supplement or replace the heavy horse-drawn vehicles with solid tyres and the mule carts. He agreed to get together a strong committee, appeal for funds and make the plans public,

while Mr. Bradby Peyman was responsible for the actual work in France. One of his earliest supporters was his great friend Lady Wantage.

Theodore Cook kept in touch with affairs in Wantage through his mother who lived at Highfield House until her death in 1920. She often joined him to watch sporting events and she also illustrated some of his books. King Alfred's received gifts of books for the library from him and he was asked to write for *The Alfredian's* first issue in July 1904. In 1921 he became the President of the Old Alfredians' Club, having been a vice-president since its inception in 1907. He always found the time to fulfil his obligations and was the life and soul of the annual dinners.

He wrote that in his mind Wantage was connected with the war in two ways. The first was the "Wantage adjustable crutch", which was patented by William Dunsmore Loveday, a retired doctor. These crutches were produced at five shillings a pair and were built on the principle that the bodyweight should be supported by the hands and arms and not left to press upon the armpit. Thus they saved thousands of wounded men from crutch palsy and continuous discomfort. The second memory was of the unveiling of the beautiful little gateway into the school playing field as a memorial to the thirty ex-pupils who sacrificed their lives in the Great War. Nor did he forget his time at Radley College because he organised the making and laid the foundation stone of the Radley War Memorial Archway.

It was to Sir Theodore that some Comrades appealed about reorganising the local branch of the Comrades Club. A meeting took place in the V C Gallery in January 1924 presided over by Brigadier-General Wigan MP supported by Sir Theodore Cook, Major T Metcalfe and Major Vaughan Williams (County Commandant). The 400 men present heard that, a site having been obtained in the town, the newly formed Comrades Club resolved to build a clubhouse. Some money had already been donated: a soldier's widow had given £500 and St. Mary's Home £50.

In his autobiography Sir Theodore makes few references to Wantage but he does describe Wantage Road station as "a few sheds" and the means of reaching it as primitive! Of the town itself he makes the following comment:

"Those who do not have to live in Wantage are delighted with the old-world air of segregation which consequently refrigerates its spacious market-place and its fine church; but the Town had begun to suffer in my father's day, and after my mother's death its slow decay became so visible that I have scarcely ever had the courage to revisit it. The quiet prosperity of one age had not been replaced by the advancing development of another. It seemed stranded between two tides. Its unique possession is the Victoria Cross Gallery, which Lady Wantage presented to the town."

In 1926 Sir Theodore published two books, *The Sunlit Hours* and *Character and Sportsmanship*, both autobiographical. But they reveal very little about the man himself. He records in passing that he married and later that his wife was a great support and companion but does not name her. His *Sunlit Hours* were like a sundial, he counted no hours that were not sunlit – "horas non numero nisi serenas". His happiness lay in the exhilaration of action, of striving after some fresh ideal or ambition, rather than in success. His obituary in The Times recorded his death from a heart attack aged 61 years on 16th September 1928, and speaks of his open and affectionate nature, his courage and enthusiasm and youthful outlook. The funeral was held at Golders Green crematorium, but there is a plaque to him and his wife, Elizabeth Whilhelmia Cook nee Link, in Wantage Cemetery.

Selected References

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Vale and Downland Museum Trust, 19 Church Street, Wantage, Oxfordshire, OX12 8BL
Telephone: 01235 771447 e-mail: museum@wantage.com