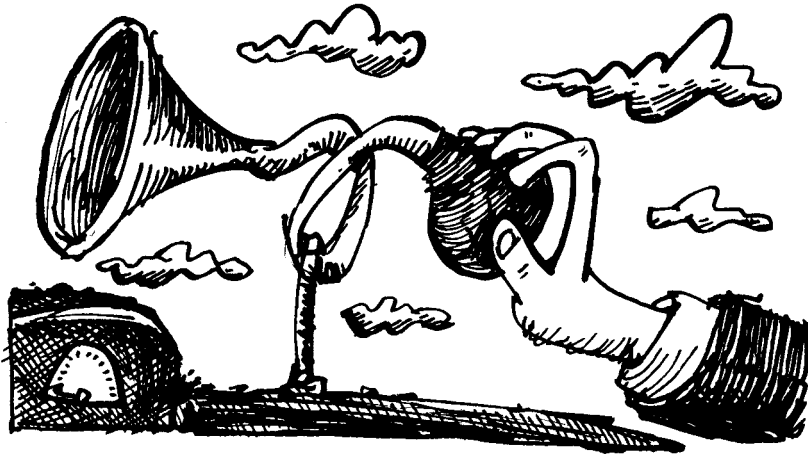


ADVENTURES IN TIME TRAVEL

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Historical fiction by the winners of  
the Young Walter Scott Prize 2020





## ADLESTROP: ONLY THE NAME

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Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize  
16-19 category

### Author's introduction

*My decision to base my story in Edwardian times was inspired by three things. Firstly, at the time I started writing the piece, we had just been launched into a national lockdown and I desperately needed some escapism and so began reading some Evelyn Waugh and then P.G. Wodehouse. I was inspired by the rollicking comedy to have a go myself and escape the cold, clinical atmosphere of global pestilence. Secondly, I thought the Edwardian period would be one of the lesser-picked historical moments to write on, given its stasis and quietness relative to the preceding Victorian period and the destructive war-dominated forty years to come. But, more than this, the Edwardian period is a part of history I've always taken interest in, precisely for its stasis and supposed naivety. Applying to read English at Durham University, I managed to find a literary niche, reading lots of EM Forster and Edward Thomas, and ended up writing my personal statement on Edwardian literature. The turn of the century and erosion of Victorianism and the empire came with an inevitable atmosphere of angst and uncertainty, and as such a literary and historical moment at odds with its own identity and self-definition. Waugh chose to laugh a bitter, sardonic laugh, Wodehouse to draw moustaches on the looking glass and chuckle to himself, Forster, James and Woolf to totally reimagine narrative technique itself and Edward Thomas to depict a time of untainted, perfect, cucumber-sandwich innocence. So, with its plethora of identities, the Edwardian time was a fruitful literary and historical moment and my piece tried to capture that sense of chaos and multitude, with its varied characters, and hapless narrator. In Edward Thomas' 'Adlestrop', a train stops at a station 'unwontedly'. 'No one left and no one came', there was merely 'Adlestrop, only the name'. I wanted to ask what was beyond that 'bare platform' amongst the quaint, silent stretches of English countryside. What is there is far from peaceful, and anything but silent.*

## ADLESTROP: ONLY THE NAME

Yes, I remember Adlestrop, the name. One afternoon of heat, the express train drew up there. Late June.... Or was it July? Or perhaps May? Temporal inconsistency is an apt introduction for the following account because I had just dashed-well missed my train out of Adlestrop and, having graced the thornbanks with a speech akin to the most unadulterated Chaucerian literature, was hurrying home.

I ought to explain what necessitated my race to catch the 4.38 from Adlestrop in the first place. You see, Adlestrop College (little known and soon to be defunct minor Public School for the sons of fallen huntsmen), was hosting the long-awaited, much-anticipated, annual school dance. It is rather a highlight of a young chap's life in Adlestrop, as, in a rare and heavily policed moment of razzle-dazzle, boys from Adlestrop College Sixth Remove, have a faint chance of actually seeing and (for the brickiest amongst us) sometimes even chatting to actual girls. Hitherto, the only known contact of that sort, was the apocryphal, oft-repeated story of two enterprising and fallen Sixth formers, who sought refuge in the hedgerow to engage in rather twiggy kisses. (On such slight, uncomfortable foundations have many a young man's dreams been fostered. I was no exception.)

So, I was in the soup. Indeed, I felt rather like a soggy crouton that has missed the sweet escape of the spoon and congealed at the bottom of the bowl... how different from my dreams...

On, on, as I always say. Back to the Bakewell-Richardson family seat, where my miscellaneous family seemed to be conspiring to stop my pleasures forever. Beginning with Ossie, before I even made it to the door.

"Carmen, is that you? Tell me you have for once performed your duty and retrieved some Ethylbenzene!" The voice was my brother's, echoing across the lawn as I approached home. Carmen was our valet; taciturn, practical, and silently enduring. A brick of a man.

"Sorry to let you down old boy, but it's me, Eddie." One had to exercise contrition when crossing one's older brother in the throes of EXPERIMENTATION. He was scientific and had seized the whole 'motor car revolution' thing with the breathless joy of a spaniel. He obsessively tended his 1912 Franklin, donated by a friend's father, who

felt, not unreasonably, that a car really ought to move if it could and that this one didn't. If anyone could persuade an intransigent hunk of metal to come to life, Ossie could. And I had caught him now in the middle of trying. He was off to the right of our broad, gravel drive, legs protruding below the bonnet.

"Eddie! What the devil are you doing back so soon? Surely you have not been let down by the great British Steam industry?" His voiced bounced off the under-carriage of the car. It was as if the motor was talking to me. His legs gyrated bizarrely, before he added, with emphasis; "Xylene!"

"Ossie, I'm a juggins. I missed the train."

"Benzene!"

"Well, I suppose so, Ossie. But actually, I was wondering if you might drive me to the dance." (I eyed the rusty metallic lump in front of me uneasily.) "Or help me persuade the Old Man to let me borrow his horse pdq."

"Eddie, you rusted-1910-Wolseley!" he retorted. "Can't you see I'm engaged in a serious procedure, the success of which will see us major contributors to British industry? Besides, you know what the Governor thinks about my 'mumchance motoring'."

I saw his point. Our father viewed all cars as the work of barbaric, possibly even Satanic, forces, designed to bring down all that was noble and proper in the Empire. He was a formidable Victorian; espousing the benefits of horse-powered transport and eschewing any but the most necessary of conversational exchanges with his first-born son, as long as he continued to indulge his delight for cruick shank and gear shift. I shuffled over to Ossie and patted his protruding ankle:

"Be a 1911 Packwood, Ossie, and help out. I'm awfully keen not to miss my dance." I caressed his sock in my most winning way.

"The gasket's blown," he told the under-carriage of the car.

The car's or my father's? It was unclear and Ossie remained part man, part vehicle. I left him to it and headed inside.

I didn't get far. In the doorway a great, paternal colonnade waited. I followed its shape upwards, from the hem of the pristine jacket, past the scowl of the beard, to the glare of bespectacled, unamused eyes.

“S-sir,” I stuttered. “It is with regret that I have to tell you that I have offended your dignity...” (He liked when we alluded to his dignity.) “... by idiotically missing my train this evening...” I shrank in apprehension.

My father’s face contorted slightly, regained its fixed position, contorted again and then relaxed into figurine stillness.

“Boy, you are a fool.” The bass of his voice emerged doom-laden from the thickety depths of his beard. He wiped his mouth with his handkerchief, folded it thrice, returned it to his pocket and rearranged his bi-focals. “You should always answer for your idiocy in all matters of wrongdoing.” (Again, the beard boomed its disapproval.) “However,” (A strange twitch and an unforeseen, unnerving jump of the moustache... Was that? Could that have been the beginnings of a smile?) “I was once young.” (This seemed improbable. As did his next utterance.) “You may take Caesar.”

Oh, the relief! I accidentally released a sort of exhalatory yippee.

“Don’t be preposterous, Edward. Get ready. You should leave imminently. I will ride Caesar round.” He straightened himself like a tropical Baobab tree and marched to the stables, to instruct the grooms. Caesar was the oxymoronic name of his horse. Although a powerful black stallion, it had been specially trained in Kent to perform dressage and was, on occasion, wont to abandon its duller, more orthodox course in favour of artistic, cadenced dressage.

Still, I would not look a gift horse (even a confused one) in the mouth. This was a second chance. I turned to find my riding boots, only to be distracted by strange, high-pitched whinnying (of the non-equine kind), echoing across the hall.

It was Mother: Deidre Didcot Bakewell-Richardson. My mother was not ordinary. In addition to being our mother, and the toast of Moreton-in-Marsh 1886, she was also the owner of a regionally famous canary collection.

I found her in the canary room, alternately whinnying and whispering to her birds. (She shared her live-fowl predilection with an obsession for the purchasing of ornamental stone birds for the gardens. Her most recent, controversial acquisition, was a 15-foot statue of a griffin, positioned with precarious magnificence on a central pedestal outside the entrance. Mother had wanted a canary statue, but she had been cowed

into submission by Father, who insisted on a griffin; rich, fantastical symbol of Victorian splendour.) Her current distress was occasioned by the fluttering precariousness of a yellow-feathered scrap in her hands. It didn’t seem keen on living one jot longer in this maelstrom of a home. (Perhaps it dreamed of flying to Adlestrop.) She swept past me: “Come, Edward. We will revive Flavo, on the range, below stairs...”

I turned to join my Mother (aware, even as I did so, that she had forgotten to close the canary cages) but was re-routed by declamations in the library.

“Thy wicked, whining, whingeing hurts mine head,

So devilishly that I feel I need more tea...”

A shriek. And then:

“Oh, when we are born, we cry that lost is the Strand Quarterly...”

This was Grandmother. She spent so much time in the library perusing Shakespeare that iambic pentameter made up much of her daily discourse. I made haste to hand her the elusive periodical (sidling tentatively in through the door, for she had a propensity to lapse into suicidal Hamlet when startled).

“Hello, Grandm –”

“FIE! FIE ON’T!” she bellowed, swivelling her head like a wind-blown barley sheaf. “Is whispering nothing?”

“Terribly sorry to have disturbed you, Grandmother. I just came to let you know, I’m off again to the dance at Buckland. You see, I missed my train from Adlestrop, because...”

“Oh Mercy! Dost thy ornithological twittering ever cease?”

“Jolly good, Grandma. I’m off now.”

She drifted towards the entrance to wave me farewell.

“Dances, revels, the ink of young man’s dye,

But far be it from me, not to wave you goodbye.”

And thus it was that I hastened out of the house, to meet my father and be re-issued ceremoniously to the dance. A car rumbled in the distance. The front doors rattled. The trees conferred in a deafening whisper. The

great, grey statue of the Griffin glared down, coldly.

“Eddie! if I haven’t found just the solution to your dilemma!” Ossie called across the drive like a car-horn. He was leaning on his Franklin with erect hair and piscine goggles.

“Thanks Ossie. Father has offered me Caesar.”

At that moment, Father emerged, rigidly perpendicular atop Caesar. His cane extended, inviting me to replace him, and his bespectacled eyes stared firmly forward. My family formed a sundry assemblage at the doorway, bizarrely determined to wave me off.

And then, quite suddenly, a spluttering, akin to that of a fur-balling cat, emerged from the car. Ossie’s eyes glared from behind his goggles as he leaned over the side door and furiously yanked at a lever. An ominous motorised groaning. The car slipped out of Ossie’s grasp, edged coyly, teasingly forward and started to pick up speed. Five pairs of eyes watched in horror as it slid remorselessly across the sloping gravel, trained ineluctably on the fabulous stone bird. Then, with what felt like an almighty, epoch-ending roar, it hit. The great, grey Griffin seemed to consider its position. It cracked, it wobbled, it prevaricated. And then, with theatrical slowness, gravity took over. Down went the bird. Toppling inelegantly sideways. It landed supine on the gravel; beak broken, claws gracelessly projecting skywards. Smoke billowed apologetically from the bonnet of the now stationary car. My family erupted.

Eyes bulging with fury, astride his steed, my father fairly roared: “Oswald. You industrialised ape! What have you done?” He kicked Caesar on, but alas, Caesar misconstrued the instructions, embarking instead on a dainty, staccato side-trot. Father’s face turned claret. He resorted to Latin, “Terribilis Equus! Incompetens Equus!” The bewildered horse became yet more vertical and regal, pirouetting obligingly round on its hind legs and tipping my father to a most precarious position.

Ossie’s frozen bewilderment turned into motorised madness. He began spasmodically reciting mechanical terms: “Ethylbenzene! Crank-case! MULTI-LINK SUSPENSION!” He ran to his errant darling.

Meanwhile, my mother, initially paralysed in disbelief, yelled like a starved hyena, “MY GLORY! MY GRIFFIN! MY PRIDE! MY JOY! I WEEP. I WEEP!” But she was drowned out by a more magnitudinous noise, as scores of canaries flew out of the house, squawking mightily.

They accosted her, mid-lament and began pecking her clothing, seeking her ubiquitous birdseed. She became one large, screaming entanglement of bird and human.

Meanwhile, in the doorway, a ball of wrinkled flesh was rocking back and forth and soliloquizing:

“O, that this too, too solid bird would melt...”

I stood, helpless. Despair around me. Disaster had well and truly struck. The Griffin had fallen, and with it, my chances of ever reaching Adlestrop College dance.

Just at that moment, a blackbird sang.

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In the end, Carmen got me to Adlestrop on the front of his bike.

The train arrived and I climbed aboard. The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat. No one left and no one came. The train exhaled and slowly started to move. What I saw was Adlestrop. Only the name... I turned away from tangled youth. Outside the window, the sweet scent of fields rose in a steaming haze. A peaceful summer evening in 1913.