



# Classics in Short: Some Old Men and Others

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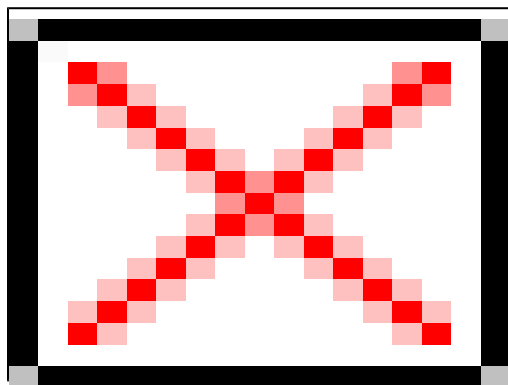
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## Classics in Short No. 145 Some Old Men and Others

**Brian Alderson** brings some much needed unalloyed entertainment.



### Gentle readers

will probably know the story of the Sick Man of Tobago who was one of the personages who featured in the **Anecdotes and Adventures of Fifteen Gentlemen**. He lived long on rice gruel and sago. But at last, to his bliss, his physician said this: 'To a roast leg of mutton you may go.'

### The *Anecdotes*

were probably first published in 1821 by a certain John Marshall in imitation of a **History of Sixteen Wonderful Old Women** which had come out a year before from a rival up the road, John Harris. So far as is known they were the first collections of verses that took the form of what were later called limericks and they were part of a happy fashion for bringing sweetness and light to the not always merry world of children's literature. There were further imitations, not least a collection of Young Ladies and the very rare **Beauties of Shakespeare** appeared among 'Wallis's (optimistically) Improved Sixpenny Books':-

Here's Falstaff, that well-fatted calf,

Who made the world all round him laugh;

He loved a fat capon

Well-larded with bacon

And Dame Quickley's sack he would quaff [\[1\]](#) [3].

### **The fashion did not continue**

but one day in the 1840s a copy of the **Anecdotes** fell into the hands of the young Edward Lear, an artist at that time notable for his magnificent hand-coloured lithographs of parrots. He had been commissioned by the Earl of Derby to compile an illustrated account of the Earl's menagerie at Knowsley Hall, near Liverpool, and in the course of his stay there he made friends with some of the children of guests who partook of the Earl's wide-ranging hospitality. (Lear dined in the servants' quarters and the children used to creep down to see him after supper because he made for enjoyable company. Before long, he found himself dining with the toffs Upstairs.) Without doubt part of the entertainment that he had to offer lay in the succession of 'nonsenses' that he invented and illustrated along the lines of the Sick Man of Tobago which he had copied into a notebook as a sort of trial copy.

### **It was an exercise**

in which he took great delight and was to become substance for the creation of a new genre of English verse after he assembled the 72 examples in the two volumes of **A Book of Nonsense**, published in 1846 as by An Old Derry-Down-Derry. It was not only notable for its devotion to unalloyed entertainment but also for its composition. Planned as a small oblong picture book (6x8½ inches) it was entirely the work of its author, the text and the pictures being printed from his own drawing on lithographic stones. Thus the neat lettering in capitals which ran through three lines, not five, to suit the books' format while the drawings were printed directly from his own images with no interference from any other reproductive method. (What's more, the whole lot was drawn backwards in order to get a positive printed result.) Unfortunately the binding employed the method much later known as 'perfect' whereby the individual leaves were gathered and pasted into the spine with a rubber solution, the result being highly imperfect since the glue lost its strength and the leaves began to fall out. Today only two or three complete copies match the intentions of the original.

### **Further woes**

attended the making of a second edition of 1855 which was also lithographed. This time the five-line text was first printed by letterpress on transfer paper which, with the ink still wet, could allow the words to be laid in reverse on to the stones, saving the business of inscribing them direct. But that was a tricky job so that the verses did not align very well and some words failed to transfer. These had to be added with a lithographic pen. In an appropriately farcical manner the printer, who would not have been Lear, muddled up the texts for the two nonsenses that concerned the Old Man of the West so that neither made pictorial sense [see pic].

### **The mere quantity**

of the verses that were printed could not help but establish the form as highly imitable although it was not till 1896 that Aubrey Beardsley is found using the term Limerick for them and there is no definitive judgment as to where that came from. But uncharitable readers have been prone to criticize the limericks' quasi-inventor for a failure fully to exploit the potential of the form. Too many examples fail to develop the initial story with a rousing final line, copping out with a mere repetition of the opening one. (I doubt if anyone needs to be told any of the hundreds of jokes in limerick form which have some sort of punch-line. These are normally divided into the clean and the cheerfully filthy [\[2\]](#) [4]. The best of both varieties can bear successful repetition as Iona Opie found on her regular research visits to the playground at Liss Primary School.)

### **What the critics ignore however**

is the coherent world that Lear has created through his drawings. It is one whose people take life seriously in the main and see nothing too unusual if their neighbours have problems with their noses or choose to feed their sons on nothing but buns. You can see that tastes and temperaments are as varied there as here ? the globular Person of Hurst cares not

that he is obese, the pigs clearly enjoy the music from the Young Lady of Bute, and the dolorous Man of Cape Horn dies of his despair. None of Lear's followers create such an ambience or do more than offer jokes; he introduces you to a parallel world where rhymes and reasons have a wild life of their own.

*Brian Alderson's Lear anthology **A Book of Bosh** was published by Puffin in 1975 and was dedicated to Kaye Webb.*

**Brian Alderson** is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His book [The 100 Best Children's Books](#) [5] is published by Galileo Publishing, 978-1903385982, £14.99 hbk.

**Edward Lear *The Complete Nonsense and Other Verse*** is published by Penguin Classics, 978-0140424652, £14.99 pbk.

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[1] [6] A masterpiece of literature not to be found, I think, in the British Library.

[2] [7] I think that the first anthology of the latter was that privately published as *Some Limericks* by Norman Douglas in 1928.

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[5] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk-www.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/239/childrens-books/reviews/the-100-best-children?s-books>

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[7] [http://booksforkeeps.co.uk-www.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/246/childrens-books/articles/classics-in-short/classics-in-short-some-old-men-and-others#\\_ftnref2](http://booksforkeeps.co.uk-www.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/246/childrens-books/articles/classics-in-short/classics-in-short-some-old-men-and-others#_ftnref2)