

# T. W. H. Crosland and the Royal Literary Fund: An Addition to the Biography

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## **T. W. H. CROSLAND AND THE ROYAL LITERARY FUND: AN ADDITION TO THE BIOGRAPHY**

Author, critic, and sometimes editor Thomas William Hodgson Crosland (1868-1924) inspired strong reactions in the members of his wide-reaching social and professional networks. He was generally held in low esteem by his literary contemporaries, with one obituary describing him as ‘a rasping satirist’, ‘Fleet-street hack’ and ‘his own worst enemy’.<sup>1</sup> Yet to W. Sorley Brown, Crosland’s friend and only biographer, Crosland was a nothing less than ‘a true poet, a master of prose, an acute, fearless and sane critic, a great satirist...and one of the most original and remarkable literary men that have ever lived’.<sup>2</sup> Given Brown’s partisan leanings, it is no surprise that he offers only a limited account of one the most sensational of Crosland’s many court battles. In April 1914, Crosland and Lord Alfred Douglas—Oscar Wilde’s erstwhile lover—were charged with conspiring to blackmail Robert Ross, Wilde’s literary executor.<sup>3</sup> Only Crosland stood trial, during which he brought briefly into the public record a fracas chronicled in the unpublished archive of the Royal Literary Fund (RLF) that reflects the tenuousness of Crosland’s literary reputation and the trust vested in the RLF by its members and the public.<sup>4</sup>

Crosland first appealed to the RLF in 1904, prompted by ill-health that rendered him unable ‘to produce the amount of work necessary for the maintenance’ of himself and his family; he was awarded a grant of £50.<sup>5</sup> A 1906 application was considered but rejected on the grounds that

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<sup>1</sup> [Anon.,] ‘A Brilliant Failure’, *Hull Daily Mail* 27 December 1924.

<sup>2</sup> W. Sorley Brown, *The Life and Genius of T. W. H. Crosland* (London, 1928), 7.

<sup>3</sup> For details of Crosland’s trials involving Ross, see Jonathan Fryer, *Robbie Ross: Oscar Wilde’s True Love* (London, 2000), 205-46; for Crosland’s crusade against Wilde’s reputation, see Joseph Bristow, ‘Introduction’, in *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens, OH, 2008), 1-45.

<sup>4</sup> The RLF is administered by the Royal Literary Society (RLS).

<sup>5</sup> Letter from T. W. H. Crosland to Arthur Llewelyn Roberts, 8 August 1904. Unless otherwise indicated, all RLF correspondence and documentation is from the RLF Archive, British Library Loan 96 RLF 1/2684. My thanks are due to Matthew Sangster for his assistance with the RLF archive and to Eileen Gunn at the RLS. All quotations used with permission.

Crosland was ‘constantly engaged in litigation’.<sup>6</sup> Nearly eight years later, Crosland again turned to the Fund. His December 1913 application offers clues as to the state of his familial relations: asked to list ‘the number, respective Ages, and Circumstances’ of his children, he responded imprecisely, ‘Eldest boy 16 or 17, others 14 & 12 or thereabouts’, and he lists his present income as ‘none’.<sup>7</sup> A grant of £75 was awarded by the committee, with the condition that it was to be paid in £25 increments every two months (January, March, and May). In fact, the first £25 installment was paid on 15 January and the remaining £50 was paid, in response to a request from the displeased Crosland, on 12 February 1914.<sup>8</sup>

Only weeks after receiving the February payment, the ostensibly penniless Crosland traveled to Monte Carlo with his mistress. Given the confidential nature of the RLF’s grant process, this detail might have passed unnoticed save Crosland’s public testimony in his trial for conspiring against Ross. Facing the initial charges, Crosland apparently offered as evidence of his good standing in the literary community the notice of grant funds awarded by the RLF. News of this event sparked outrage among some RLF members. In a letter dated 25 April 1914, Edmund Gosse wrote to RLF Secretary Arthur Llewelyn Roberts<sup>9</sup>: ‘Perhaps you will be interested to learn that the egregious Mr. Crosland hands in the letter from you, announcing a grant from the R.L.F, as a main tribute to his worth and respectability, in the criminal trial now commenced’.<sup>10</sup> When a response was not immediately forthcoming, Gosse wrote again, noting that he was ‘absolutely unable to conceive’ why Roberts ‘failed to warn the Committee of the antecedents of’ Crosland’s application and warning that the organization faced ‘much injury’ should the turn of events come to light.<sup>11</sup> Thinking that the original disbursement terms of the grant were intact and that a third payment was due Crosland in May, Gosse urged Roberts in a later letter that ‘it is highly important for the credit of the Royal Literary Fund that this third payment should be stopped’; it was of course too late to do so.<sup>12</sup>

When Roberts did respond to Gosse, he explained that he ‘had no notion’ of the pending

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from Roberts to Edmund Gosse, undated [appx. 25 April 1914].

<sup>7</sup> RLF Application from T. W. H. Crosland, dated 29 December 1913. The RLF minutes record that ‘the case was authenticated by Dr. Pryce Jenkins, Mr. Herman Frick, + Lord Alfred Douglas’. Only Frick’s letter appears in the case files. Meeting Minutes from 14 January 1914, Minutes Book of the Royal Literary Fund, ix, 576. British Library Loan 96 RLF 2/1/9.

<sup>8</sup> ‘A letter was read, from Mr. T. W. H. Crosland. Resolved...that the remaining £50 of Mr. Crosland’s grant be paid at once’. Meeting Minutes from 11 February 1914, Minutes Book of the Royal Literary Fund, ix, 578-9.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Llewelyn Roberts (1855-1919) served as Secretary of the RLF from 1884-1919.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Edmund Gosse to Roberts, 21 April 1914.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Edmund Gosse to Roberts, 25 April 1914.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Edmund Gosse to Roberts, 28 April 1914.

charges when the grant was approved by the committee. Further, Roberts assured Gosse that the prosecutorial team (Lewis & Lewis) pledged to ‘use their influence’ to keep ‘any reference to [the RLF]’ ‘out of the press’.<sup>13</sup> Alas, any such efforts failed proved ineffectual, likely because the information cast Crosland in such a negative light. According to the *Times*, Crosland admitted under oath ‘that in March last [1914] he took his mistress for a tour of the South of France. He applied to the Royal Literary Fund, as he was hard up and ill. He asked for a grant, and received £75’. When pushed on the question as to whether he claimed destitution in order to receive the grant, he responded ‘I don’t know about destitution: I had no money’, and when pressed about his mistress, he retorted ‘I did not go with any of the money you spoke of’.<sup>14</sup> Crosland insisted that he used a different £80 that he borrowed from a moneylender for the trip.<sup>15</sup> These public revelations sparked another round of indignation among RLS members, prompting letters to Roberts from George C. Williamson, E. S. P. Haynes, and Charles Walpole.<sup>16</sup>

Any RLF fallout stemming from the publicity seems to have been tempered by 1924, when they awarded another grant for the ailing Crosland. Yet this interaction also proved to be thorny. Again not wishing to give Crosland the full amount at once, Hugh John Cole Marshall, who took over the Secretary role from Roberts in 1919, wrote to journalist George Herbert Mair (whom J. C. Squire recommended to administer the funds) that the ‘Committee wish Mr. Crosland to receive the amount as a dole, and not as a lump sum’, and suggested £4 or £5 a week.<sup>17</sup> This arrangement suited neither Crosland nor, as it turned out, Mair. Crosland wrote to Marshall that Mair was his ‘inveterate enemy’ who had been ‘the means of losing [his] employment’ with the Evening Standard and Sunday Herald papers, and that it was ‘distasteful and humiliating’ to expect Crosland even to communicate with Mair. If that were not enough, Crosland impugned Mair to the Secretary: ‘How in the name of all that is tragical, Mair, a person twenty years younger than myself...much more given to Bohemianism and the careless spending of money

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<sup>13</sup> Letter from Roberts to Edmund Gosse, undated [appx. 25 April 1914].

<sup>14</sup> ‘The Crosland Trial: Cross Examination of the Defendant’, Times [London] 4 July 1914.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Mr. Crosland and the Charwoman’, Evening News 4 July 1914; the account is repeated in ‘The Crosland Trial’, Times [London] 6 July 1914.

<sup>16</sup> Crosland expressed his own outrage on the stand, suggesting that lawyer F. E. Smith was ‘disgraceful’ to ask about his mistress, questions that would ‘ruin’ him and cause his wife to ‘take divorce proceedings’ against him. (She did not). ‘Crosland Angry: Cross-Examination by Mr. F. E. Smith’, Evening News 3 July 1914.

<sup>17</sup> This account is confirmed by the RLF minutes, which indicate that ‘Mr. J. C. Squire and the Secretary’ were ‘to arrange to the grant for be administered by installments, and not as a lump sum.’ The phrase ‘by a dole’ was written and struck through, replaced with ‘by installments’. Minutes Book of the Royal Literary Fund, x, 540. British Library Loan 96 RLF 2/1/10.

than I have ever been, should be set up to supervise my expenditure passes comprehension'.<sup>18</sup> Incensed, Crosland asked for the amount in full, to be paid immediately, but the most Marshall would do was to administer the grant himself in £20 monthly disbursements.

This encounter seems to have been the final straw for RLF Committee members. Following Crosland's death in December 1924, Annie Crosland—his impoverished widow—sought relief both from the Royal Bounty Fund and, eventually, the RLF. In his correspondence with the Patrick Gower, private secretary to the Prime Minister and overseer of the Royal Bounty Fund, Marshall expressed suspicion at Mrs. Crosland's claim. Marshall suggested that he would 'like to know whether the sons, who were killed or invalided in the war, were hers or not. It may have been a case of an old man having made a late marriage merely for the sake of getting a housekeeper';<sup>19</sup> he further encouraged Gower to request a copy of Mrs. Crosland's marriage certificate. In a later letter to Gower, Marshall suggests that the 'mistress' alluded to in Crosland's conspiracy trial might have presented herself to the RLF as Crosland's housekeeper, further complicating matters for his actual widow. Despite such trepidation, the Fund did ultimately approve a grant of £50 for Mrs. Crosland. Marshall apologized for the limited scope of aid in a letter to Gwendolyn Anley, who had supported Annie Crosland's application; 'I am afraid I have not been very successful. Mr. Crosland's ingratitude and ill manners still rankle in the bosom of my Committee'. Perhaps contributing to the committee's disapprobation is the fact that Mrs. Crosland listed her husband's income during the last year of his life (which he had stated was 'nil' in his own April 1924 application) as between £30 and £40 weekly. It is a curious coda to the story that of all those 'rankled' committee members, it was Edmund Gosse—once a vocal opponent of the Fund's support of Crosland—who made the motion to award Mrs. Crosland the grant.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Letter from Crosland to Marshall, 27 May 1924. Mair also begged off in a letter to Marshall, 28 May 1924. Brown alludes briefly to the tangle, laying all blame at the feet of Mair.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Marshall to Patrick Gower, 20 May 1925.

<sup>20</sup> Meeting Minutes from 14 July 1926, Minutes Book of the Royal Literary Fund, xi, 61-2. British Library Loan 96 RLF 2/1/11.