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Poet and local patriot — the Sage of Albury

by Derek Hudson



Martin Tupper

EARLIER this year I noticed a newspaper advertisement for a Warden of Tupper's Court, Albury, a unit of 18 modern flats for the elderly run by Guildford Borough Council. I was delighted to see it - not because I had any hopes of becoming warden but because I guessed (and later was able to confirm) that the council had had the bright idea of commemorating Martin Tupper (1810-1889), that extraordinary character once known as the "Sage of Albury".

I was reminded of the time in the 1940s when the firm of Constable bought Tupper's 22 scrapbooks - full of newspaper cuttings, photographs, diaries and autograph letters - so that I could write a biography, *Martin Tupper: His Rise and Fall*. Afterwards I tried to interest Guildford Corporation in the idea of acquiring these scrapbooks, which are of great local interest. But I was not successful. Instead they repose in the library of the University of Illinois at Urbana, U.S.A.

Fame

Tupper's fame was founded on his *Proverbial Philosophy*, which went through 50 English editions and four separate series between 1838 and 1880, and became a new *Pilgrim's Progress* for the early Victorians. In America the sales were much greater, though in the absence of international copyright Tupper received next to nothing from them.

He had a sensational welcome when he visited the States in 1851, and wrote from Philadelphia: "The very barber, who cut my hair today, saved me bits! and will no doubt make a good thing of it." Inviting him to dinner at the White House, President Fillmore said: "Several members of my cabinet will be present, and I hope you may enjoy it."

In 1857 Queen Victoria gave an audience to Tupper at Buckingham Palace, when she declared: "I thank you, Mr. Tupper, for your beautiful poetry; and my children are anxious to thank you too."

'Rhythmics'

Tupper originally made no distinction between "poetry" and "rhythmics". His own definition of the form, which he borrowed from Solomon, was "rhythmics," and he conceived of it primarily as a religious and moral work. In the end, however, Tupper succeeded in convincing all writers of free verse from Whitman to Eliot - that they liked it or not! In Illinois Mauriac is right in saying that no large success is warranted. *Proverbial Philosophy* must still be worth a look, but in the county of Albury Tupper stands for something more clearly admir-

able: local patriotism and local involvement of every kind.

Tupper's novel, *Stephan Langton*, first published in 1858, was kept in print at Guildford until two or three years ago, and must have done more to interest Surrey readers in the history of their county than almost any other publication. Written in the manner of Harrison Ainsworth, it is full of "methinks", "sirrahs" and "churls". The episodes at Friday Street, Old Tangley, St Martha's, and above all the tragedy which Tupper devised for what he called "the Silent Pool" at Albury, have been accepted as truth in countless local homes.

Untrustworthy

Of course, the novel is historically quite untrustworthy. Yet one finds it difficult to be too angry with Tupper. As he told a friend, *Stephan Langton* is "history and biography romanticised, - and localised hereabouts, to make our country classic ground..."

Tupper inherited Albury House with nine acres of land from his mother's family in 1840 and lived there for 40 years. Today the quaint old house is occupied by a firm of consulting engineers. Situated between the village inn and Albury Park, Tupper was well placed to play a part in parish politics. A local paper of the 1850s reported one of his annual May Day celebrations:

"Under the auspices of Martin F. Tupper, Esq., a true type of the old English gentleman, all the children of the school and village assembled at an early hour in the morning in their best holiday attire, and carrying a profusion of garlands, etc., proceeded to the grounds of that gentleman, where they were regaled with buns and milk to their hearts' content, and afterwards sang some excellent pieces of poetry..."

Tupper was a formidable defender of the old village church in Albury Park. He also claimed an "inalienable right of burial" in the old churchyard which was closed in 1855. (Henry Drummond of Albury Park is believed to have told him: "You may come and be buried here as soon as you like!")

Got it wrong

Another of his great interests was the archaeological site at Farley Heath, which he rediscovered and excavated in

vigorous amateur fashion in 1848. Of course, Tupper got it wrong, believing that Farley was a Roman military station when it was actually a Romano-Celtic temple; but without his efforts the site might never have been properly investigated a century later.

Tupper was the chief propagandist in the great volunteer revival of 1859. The motto "Defence not Defiance" came from one of his poems, and he designed a uniform for a local rifle corps which, to his sorrow, was never established. A poster then appeared all over the Guildford area advertising a meeting to found a less ambitious "West Surrey Rifle Club." In time this materialised as "The Blackheath Rifles," later merged with the 22nd Company of Surrey Rifle Volunteers.

No one could doubt Tupper's rather fussy benevolence, or his patriotism, local and national. Though he was never made Poet Laureate (it was a close thing at one time) he issued a continual stream of poems and ballads on every conceivable subject of public interest.

Anti-slavery

Many Americans visited Albury, and so did two black presidents of the new republic of Liberia - which Tupper had encouraged as part of his campaign against slavery. Albury villagers were amazed to see them wearing evening dress in the daytime.

From the 1860s Tupper's fortunes declined steadily. The widowed queen was no longer interested. Journalists increasingly mocked him. But Tupper kept on bravely to the end. Verses like his *Never Give Up* were not great poetry, but it was something to see an author practising what he preached.

Before he died in Upper Norwood in 1889, Tupper had parted with Albury House and was largely dependent on a civil list pension. He was buried near the churchyard gate of Albury "new" church, the headstone bearing the inscription "He being dead yet speaketh."

If Tupper could now speak to the inhabitants of Tupper's Court, I believe he would still say, "Never give up," but add "Enjoy living in Surrey."