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"Raven: The Turbulent World of Baron Corvo", Richard Scoble, London 2013 : [recenzja]

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Richard Scoble. *Raven: The Turbulent World of Baron Corvo*. London: Strange Attractor, 2013.

Frederick Rolfe, also known as Baron Corvo, sought recognition as an artist throughout most of his life. He dabbled in painting, graphic design, and photography, before finally deciding to focus on writing. After he published a cycle of short stories in John Lane's and Henry Harland's *Yellow Book*, he gained some recognition, and he subsequently published six books between the years 1898 and 1905. However, his works never became popular during his lifetime, even though they received positive reviews. When Rolfe died in Venice in 1913, it seemed that he would be quickly forgotten. Yet, as time passed, an increasing number of readers became interested in his writing. One of these readers, A. J. A. Symons, wrote the first book-length biography of Rolfe, *The Quest for Corvo*, which was published in 1934. The work brought about a wave of interest in Rolfe and his novels, and even though his books never managed to become exceedingly popular, some of them are considered as minor classics, particularly *Hadrian the Seventh*.

The issue many found most fascinating in relation to Rolfe was his tumultuous life, his eccentric character, and his habit of picking acerbic quarrels with his benefactors, which left him homeless and destitute a number of times. Not surprisingly in such a situation, biographical accounts pertaining to him often were more popular than his own works. This was problematic, as the quality and accuracy of the first two major biographies of Rolfe left a lot to be desired at times. The third, the first to be written by an academic specializing in British literature of the period, was Miriam J. Benkovitz's *Frederick Rolfe: Baron Corvo*. Published in 1977. The book is well-researched, yet it also is characterized by a series of minor factual errors and a number of editorial mistakes.

Robert Scoble's *Raven: The Turbulent World of Baron Corvo* is the first book to discuss Rolfe's life since Benkovitz's work. However, it is not a typical biography but a collection of 15 essays that concern different periods and episodes of Rolfe's life. They are organized thematically into three groups, and within these groups they are ordered chronologically. The first part concentrates on Rolfe's family and his relationship with them, while the second and third parts respectively discuss episodes from his life in England and Italy.

Although some chapter titles suggest that they focus more on Rolfe's family, acquaintances, and various topics surrounding his life ("The Pedestrian Uncle," "The Real Sebastian Archer," "The Splendid Olympian"), this is not the case. Most focus predominantly on Rolfe and provide interesting perspectives that previously either have not been explored or were treated in an unsatisfying manner. These chapters discuss such issues as his political views ("Rolfe the Jacobite"), his now-lost family tree of the Borgia family ("The Lost Borgiada"), his career as a teacher and private tutor ("Cigars and Tree Carvings"), as well as his relationship with the director of the British School in Athens, Richard MacGillivray Dawkins ("The Artist and the Scholar"). The essays are insightful and fill several lacunae in Rolfe's biography, particularly providing detailed information on his relationship with his family, pupils and benefactors, all issues that, at best, have been only skimmed through in his previous biographies. At worst, they were inaccurate and rendered a false, and often unjustified, image of Rolfe. Other chapters offer new information on Rolfe's fascination with astrology, his sexuality, and his doings with the

Royal Literary Fund. *Raven* also discusses Rolfe's family members and acquaintances who have not been previously analysed by biographers, providing fairly detailed portraits of Rolfe's brothers, particularly Herbert and Alfred, and other members of the family, such as Frederick Rolfe's uncle, W. H. Patten Saunders, and the influence he could have had on Frederick.

Of the elements hitherto downplayed by biographers and researchers, Scoble extensively discusses the dealings of the Rolfe family, particularly his brother Herbert's, with Frederick's early biographers, A. T. Bartholomew and A. J. A. Symons. The issue is particularly interesting in relation to Symons' *Quest*, in which Herbert is presented in an unsympathetic manner. Many believed that Herbert's behavior, as depicted in the book, was dictated by his will to protect both his family's and Frederick's reputation. However, this was based mostly on conjecture. *Raven* sheds considerable light on this issue, both in terms of Herbert's relationship with Frederick, as well as the reasons for his caution, such as several articles written in the 1920s that were both inaccurate and damaging to Rolfe's reputation. Other inaccuracies of the *Quest* are further discussed in other chapters, in which Scoble reveals that, e.g., Symons suppressed a letter, written by one of Rolfe's pupils, that depicted the author in positive light and contradicted some of Symons' conclusions.

Even though Rolfe is at the center of *Raven*, some parts of the book focus more on Rolfe's acquaintances rather than on him. This is the case with two chapters: "A Duchess and Her Past" and "The Ruin of The O'Sullivans." The former is a biographical sketch of the duchess Caroline Sforza Cesarini, under whose patronage Rolfe became fascinated with Italian culture. The latter chapter focuses on the O'Sullivans, a once-wealthy family of coffee traders, two of whom, Percy and Vincent, were Rolfe's students. Although Rolfe remains in the background of these two chapters, they are nonetheless justified as they focus on people who have had a significant influence on the author, and whom he greatly respected, to the point that he included literary tributes to them in his novels.

Some previous accounts of Rolfe's life have been compromised by their authors' utter fascination with the subject, which took its toll on their critical aspect, particularly Donald Weeks' *Corvo*. Fortunately, this is not the case with *Raven*. Scoble is careful to justify the topics he discusses and sufficiently prove their significance in the context of Rolfe's life. At the same time, he is cautious in his judgment and does not draw premature or far-fetched conclusions. The book is well-researched, and Scoble uses a number of sources that either have not been known to previous biographers or which have been greatly underutilized, such as Rolfe's correspondence with the Royal Literary Fund and his brother, Herbert.

Raven adds to the existing body of work on Rolfe, yet despite the fact that Scoble provides a brief chronology of Rolfe's life, the book is by no means a comprehensive biography. It focuses only on several topics and goes into specific details, and a reader who does not have more detailed knowledge on Rolfe's life than the brief biographical outline provided may lack the framework needed to fully understand the significance of particular issues. Misconceptions promoted by other biographical accounts may also be problematic in this context. Nonetheless *Raven* recognizes its relationship with these books, and when necessary Scoble notices their shortcomings and is prepared to discuss them in a constructive and direct manner – if not in the main text, then in the extensive

endnotes. At the same time, he does not reject the merits of these biographies. Owing to the quality of its research, the use of previously unused materials, and a discussion of matters not discussed by Rolfe's previous biographers, *Raven* is a welcome addition to other works published on Rolfe.

Works Cited

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