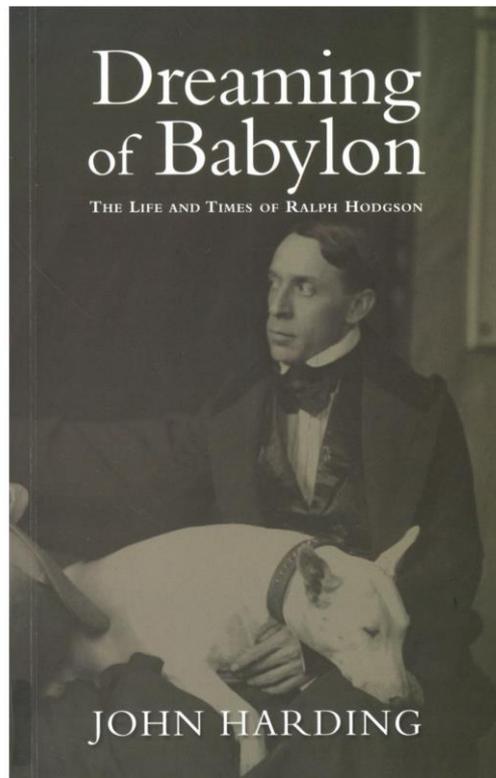


Dreaming of Babylon

The Life and Times of Ralph Hodgson

by **John Harding** (2008)



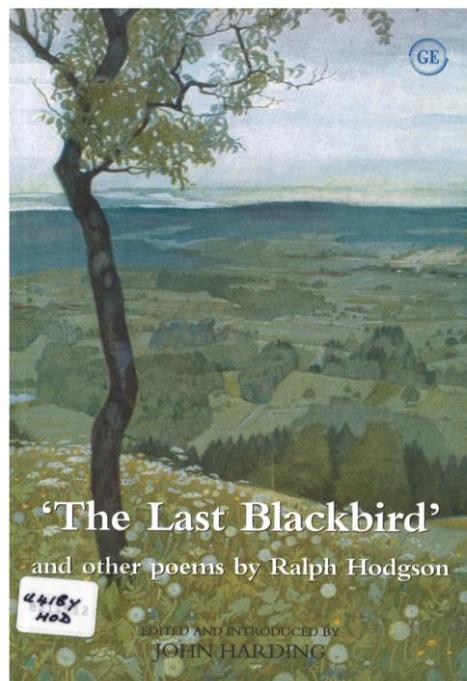
Reviewing this biography, Chris Lloyd called Hodgson ‘the most highly regarded poet of his heyday, which was just before the First World War.’ (The Northern Echo 27/2/2009) Nowadays we might think of him perhaps as one of Darlington’s most forgotten famous men.

Hodgson was born in Garden Street in 1871; he also lived in Station Terrace, opposite Bank Top Station, which the book calls ‘Darlington slums’, after the collapse of his father’s coal business. He was the eighth of eleven children, left school at 14 and had what sounds like a rather wild and carefree adolescence. He eventually followed one of his elder brothers to London – Walker Hodgson was making a successful career in cartooning and illustration for the newspapers, having started out on the Northern Echo himself. It was into this world and through these contacts that Ralph began to make a name for himself. Some of his drawings are reproduced in the text, including, from much later in life, a quirky portrait of his third wife, one elegant boot disappearing behind a door as she leaves to do the dishes. He was in sufficient demand in Fleet Street by 1895 to be the artist sketching Oscar Wilde’s trials at the Old Bailey in the ‘Evening News’.

Much of the pleasure of this biography is in the incidental detail, the references to other more well-known names and thus a rather gossipy angle on the period in question. Ralph became great friends with Walter de la Mere and T.S.Eliot, for

example. The latter pursued Hodgson for a while in the vain hope that he would illustrate his 'Old Possums Book of Practical Cats'. Eliot wrote a ditty about him that ran, 'How delightful to meet Mr. Hodgson! (Everybody wants to know him!)' In fact, that seems to get to the heart of the matter, as Hodgson was a fiercely private man who strongly resisted the idea of publicity, and, indeed, the very thought of anybody attempting a biography of his life.

Hodgson had three marriages and lived on three continents: he taught at Tokyo University for five years and after that settled permanently in Ohio. He won prizes for his poetry, including the Polignac Prize in 1914 for 'The Sword of Honour', probably his most popular work and one, because of the subject matter and its timing, which gave a nationalistic slant to his reputation. Later, in 1954, he was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. He had many themes though, especially relating to the natural world, birds of all kinds and his abiding life-long passion for dogs. The book might have benefitted from printing some of the longer poems in full, letting them speak for the poet. He does not give the impression of having wanted to elucidate on them much himself. Enid Bagnold, the novelist and playwright, and a friend, commented that 'he talked in pointers and always stopped before being precise'.



The Centre for Local Studies also has a copy of his book of poems; The Last Blackbird, so you can read some of his poems in full.

