

Press Information

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London

Readings mark centenary of death on the Somme of writer who mocked Edwardian society

A Century of Saki, Leicester Square Theatre, Monday 14 November 2016, 7pm

*“When I was younger, boys of your age used to be nice and innocent,” said the Duchess.
“Now we are only nice,” replied Reginald. “One must specialise in these days.”*

Reginald at the Theatre

Hector Hugh Munro, better known by his pen-name Saki, was killed in action in the final stages of the Somme campaign on 14 November 1816. To those who knew him only from his sparkling, acidly witty short stories, it must have seemed an incongruous end. But Munro was a conundrum, at once both deeply conservative and radically irreverent.

Scattered with perfectly crafted epigrams that easily bear comparison with Oscar Wilde, his satires of high society tell of youth besting age; mischief and imagination conquering dullness and convention. Take Reginald, the title character of two early collections of his stories. An aloof, camp young man who believes that “it’s dreadfully bad for one to think whilst one’s dressing”, Reginald is apt to respond to taunts about his lack of skill at a weekend’s shooting party by getting up early next morning and blasting away at a peacock at point-blank range. “They said afterwards that it was a tame bird; that’s simply *silly*, because it was awfully wild at the first few shots.”

Munro’s mother died when he was very young, and he was brought up by two strict maiden aunts, who clearly left an indelible impression. Aunts and guardians come off rather badly in several of his stories. In *The Lumber Room*, the offending relative is left to languish in a water tank for several hours, but Mrs de Ropp, villain of the much stranger tale *Sredni Vashtar*, meets an altogether darker fate, while her charge blithely helps himself to another piece of toast.

These stories have sometimes attracted accusations of misogyny, and judging from some of his stories it seems that Munro was no supporter of women’s suffrage. Nonetheless, many of his stories feature heroines every bit as witty and mischievous as Reginald and his fellows. Take the devilishly reincarnated *Laura*, who torments her best friend’s irritable husband from beyond the grave; Lady Carlotta, who is mistaken for a governess and gamely spends several days leading her tiresome hostess’s children astray by teaching them in the invented and thoroughly unsuitable *Schartz-Metterklume Method*; or Vera in *The Open Window*, who scares a nervous visitor half to death by convincing him that her uncles had died years before, and the figures he sees returning from a shooting trip are their ghosts.

Despite the constant undermining of authority that he meted out in his stories, Munro was a devout Tory, and a patriot. In his 1913 novel *When William Came*, he sought to warn the nation about the dangers of German imperial aggression by envisaging a Britain conquered and over-run by the Kaiser’s forces. In characteristic style, it is ultimately only the children who have the nerve and courage to stand up to the invaders.

When war came the following year, Munro enlisted, despite being officially too old at 43. He refused a commission and served as a private in the trenches, later being promoted to lance-sergeant. One day a General was inspecting the troops and recognised Munro, whom he’d met at dinner-parties in London. “What on earth are you doing here?” he asked, and offered Munro a job away from the front line. He refused.



On the 14th of November 1916, his regiment were crossing no-man's land to occupy trenches evacuated by the enemy. Munro's last words, moments before he was shot through the head by a sniper, were reported as "Put that bloody cigarette out!"

To mark the centenary of his death, **Richard Crowest** will read a selection of his best stories at the Leicester Square Theatre in London, at 7pm. Richard is writer, actor and broadcaster who has won international acclaim for his readings of Saki and E.F. Benson.

"Beautifully read. Wonderfully acted." – Bruce Dow

"Nobody could do these fantastic stories more justice"– iTunes review

Leicester Square Theatre

6 Leicester Place, London WC2H 7BX

Tickets £10. Box office: tel 020 7734 2222; book online: bit.ly/saki100

Audiobook readings of Saki's stories by Richard Crowest can be downloaded free from: corvidae.co.uk/saki

Ends

Press contact: Richard Crowest

Telephone 07788 546141

Email richard@corvidae.info

Photographs:

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