

The Royal Literary Fund

A Short History

Janet Adam Smith

The author was President of the RLF from 1976 to 1984

The foundation of the Literary Fund was the most solid and lasting achievement of a flamboyant, inventive and controversial character, the Rev. David Williams. Williams was a dissenting minister apt to quarrel with his congregations; a friend of Garrick and of Benjamin Franklin, to whom he gave shelter in 1774; a correspondent of Voltaire and Frederick the Great; author of many works, including *Sermons, chiefly upon Religious Hypocrisy*; honorary citizen of France, in recognition of his enthusiasm for the Revolution, expressed on a visit in 1792.

The idea of a fund to relieve authors in distress had been in his mind for some years when the death of an elderly translator of Plato, Floyer Sydenham, in a debtors' prison, provided the spur to action. The first committee meeting was held on 18 May 1790, and subscriptions invited. One of the first to subscribe was the Prince Regent, who also presented the Fund with a house in Gerrard Street, Soho, for its offices. The Fund has continued to receive royal patronage and help and in 1842, thanks to the enthusiastic interest of the Prince Consort, was allowed to add 'Royal' to its title.

From its beginnings the Fund has counted distinguished names among its roll of beneficiaries. In 1796 there was Coleridge; in 1799 Chateaubriand, then in exile in Britain. (The Fund's grants have never been restricted on grounds of nationality, sex, religion or politics). Among later writers it helped were Thomas Love Peacock, James Hogg, Leigh Hunt, Thomas Hood, Richard Jefferies, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Ivy Compton-Burnett and Mervyn Peake. The roll also has the names of Robert Burns's widow and James Boswell's daughter, forerunners of the many

dependants whom the Fund has helped when an author's death has left them in financial distress. We are proud that the Fund has been able to relieve such writers, but no less proud that it should have relieved thousands of the lesser known: men and women who as poets, novelists, biographers, translators, dramatists, critics, have followed their profession seriously without finding fortune; who have managed to make ends meet until some accident – illness, collapse of a publishing house or journal, change in literary fashion – has reduced their earnings and increased their liabilities. By its grants the Fund has enabled many in the full tide of their career to overcome a temporary set-back; and has given many others an easier old age, when royalties have dwindled and creative energies waned. And although the Fund has received no subsidy from the Government, it has been able to help many authors to claim their rights to the insurance and social security benefits which the welfare state provides.

The storm signal that an author is in distress is often run up by a fellow-writer. The secretary then collects information from the applicant, and presents his or her case to the Committee whose members – authors, publishers, journalists, literary agents – represent a wide spectrum of literary life. At each of their monthly meetings they consider the applications; there were about 215 in the year 2003/04. The first hurdle applicants have to surmount is that of literary merit, which is assessed on the basis of reports by members who have studied samples of the writer's work and considered their careers. The Committee then scrutinises a statement of the applicant's financial position, backed by letters from friends and colleagues. In 2003/04, 211 writers and dependants were given grants and pensions.

All the Fund's money has come from subscriptions, donations and legacies. For much of its money-raising in the nineteenth century, and up to 1939, the Fund relied on an annual dinner. On these occasions the great and the famous – statesmen and heroes as well as distinguished authors: Gladstone, Palmerston, Dr. Livingstone, Stanley Baldwin as well as Dickens, Thackeray, Browning, Barrie, Kipling – exhorted the guests to be generous and cheque-forms were placed beside each diner. Part of the Fund's present income derives from the capital built up by such previous efforts; a significant proportion now comes from royalties bequeathed

over the years. We have profited from the estates of Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, Rupert Brooke, G. K. Chesterton, Arthur Ransome and, outstandingly, A. A. Milne and Somerset Maugham. Along with its literary-minded members, the Committee and Management includes those with the expertise to ensure that the best use is made of our financial assets.

For obvious reasons of confidentiality towards beneficiaries and their immediate families, the Archive of the Fund (now deposited in the British Library for the benefit of scholars and also available on micro film) stops at 1939 with case number 3662. But the Fund's work continues – we are now in the 5000s – and inflation has added to the needs of writers, and to our determination to help them to the best of our ability.

Established and prosperous authors have throughout been very ready to help less fortunate colleagues, by recommending applicants to the Fund and writing letters in support. Thackeray pleads for Francis Maceroni, aide to Joachim Murat, King of Naples, whose biography he wrote: 'the poor man, with a wife and I believe six children, is *starving*'. Dickens hopes the Fund will help his former colleague on *Household Words*, Richard Henry ("Hengist") Horne, who has lost his money in the goldfields of Australia. Browning writes to Trollope, Treasurer of the Fund, to recommend John Frazer Corkran – 'There never was, in my opinion, a more worthy and exemplary man ...I am not chargeable with mechanically making declarations of this nature'. Carlyle presses the claim of William Maccall, whose books on ethics though 'full of heroic conviction and indicating no inconsiderable faculty of original thought' are 'unlikely to find a general audience'. Henry James pleads for a dependant: the widow of Charles Dickens the younger (whose literary claim was based on his editorship of *All the Year Round*).

'Permit me to express the desire to give my earnest support to the question of making an allowance from the Royal Literary Fund to Mrs. Charles Dickens, who has been left wholly unprovided for by the death of her husband. I feel as a man of letters – as I am sure we *all* must feel — the strength of the appeal residing in the urgent character of Mrs. Dickens's need and in the eloquent association of the illustrious name she bears'.

Writers no longer languish in debtors' prisons, but the need for help now is no less than on the day when David Williams

assembled his friends in the Prince of Wales coffee house in Conduit Street to establish his Literary Fund to aid authors in distress.

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Postscript

The Royal Literary Fund has, since its inception in 1790, continuously helped authors who are in financial difficulties as a result of personal or professional setbacks.

However, an increase in the Fund's endowment following the sale of its share of the merchandising rights in the work of A. A. Milne to Disney in 2001 has provided an opportunity to broaden its reach.

A Fellowship Scheme was set up in 1999 to place writers in Higher Education Institutions to help students with practical writing. There are at present 42 authors involved in the Scheme, which is now established as a truly national network – from Aberdeen to Brighton and Aberystwyth to Norwich – and has become an essential part of the Fund's activities.

A Strategy Sub-committee has recently been formed to provide a forum, for discussion of future developments, and to ensure that the Fund continues to monitor its systems and procedures to maximise its resources for all of its current and prospective beneficiaries.

The Fund now has a website, www.rlf.org.uk, where further details of its activities can be found.

The RLF's endowment is invested and regularly reviewed in such a way as to protect its assets while obtaining the best possible return.

By careful decision making, the trustees have ensured that the Fund is positioned on solid foundations, and its future and that of its beneficiaries is secure.

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General Secretary
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