

NHMF grant brings world's most comprehensive Rupert Brooke collection in reach

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King's College marks centenary of the First World War poet's death by pursuing unique manuscripts.

Image



Rupert Brooke

Image



Speight, Rugby © King's College Archive
Rupert Brooke as a Rugby student.

Rupert Brooke, war poet and Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, died 100 years ago (23 April 1915) on his way to fight at Gallipoli, and is buried on the island of Skyros. A £430,000 award from the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) will enable the college to acquire the last great collection of Rupert Brooke manuscripts in private hands, the John Schroder Collection.

The Schroder collection contains writings by Brooke, hundreds of letters between Brooke and others, the records of his extraordinary publication history, as well as reports from eyewitnesses of his death. It will complement King's existing extensive collection of Brooke papers and provide a rich source of previously unseen material for writers and researchers. It will also be of great interest to the public and exhibitions based on the collection are planned.

Peter Jones, King's College Fellow Librarian, says: "We are delighted that thanks to this generous award of £430,000 from the National Heritage Memorial Fund towards the £500,000 price of the manuscripts we should be able to maintain the integrity of the Schroder collection and allow future researchers to gain a better understanding of the man and his times. The centenary of his death on 23 April

2015 makes this announcement particularly auspicious."

Jones continues: "It is hard to realise today just how significant Brooke's impact had been a hundred years ago.

"In the early 20th century as a poet you were fortunate to sell 200-300 copies of your work. Just after his death, Brooke's close friend and patron Eddie Marsh published 1914 and other poems. The first edition of 1,000 sold out immediately and in all 160,000 copies were sold of various impressions. It was a huge literary event, fuelled by the timing and circumstances of Brooke's death.

"A cult was created by Winston Churchill and other admirers who turned Brooke into a paragon of youthful hero-soldier-poet. In 1918 Eddie Marsh published a memoir about Brooke with his Collected Poems and this also sold more than 100,000 copies.

"Some of Rupert Brooke's closest friends, the ones who knew him the best, actually resented the fact that he was turned into this kind of national icon. They thought the picture of Brooke that emerged from this heroic story was not true to the man."

For example, in a letter from the Schroder Collection, written 8 August 1915 in response to a petition by Marsh to rethink her decision, Brooke's mother states very firmly that it is her 'final wish' for Marsh not to publish the memoir and adds that "I don't think that you knew more than a small part of Rupert." (She later relented and allowed the memoir to be published.)

Jones continues: "It is a much more complicated and rounded picture that emerges when you can look at the manuscripts that we have here alongside those in the Schroder Collection. Brought together, these collections will tell a rather different story than we have so far. We know much more now about Brooke as a person and he is certainly more interesting and in some ways more difficult than the heroic image that was portrayed at the time of his death. He was a very conflicted individual; he had a major breakdown in 1912 and had disastrous relationships with the women who loved him."

The Schroder Collection contains 170 documents by Brooke himself and many hundreds of letters from connected parties. John Schroder's passion for collecting began as a schoolboy when he bought a copy of Rupert Brooke's Collected Poems and by the 1950s he was a deeply committed collector of all things Brooke. His most significant purchase was that of the Marsh/Brooke papers. He also met and spoke with the people who had been significant in Brooke's life and acquired their

correspondence.

The papers express the feelings of those on the edge of the abyss: Cathleen Nesbitt, an actress and romantic interest of Brooke's wrote cathartic letters to Marsh with poignant memories of their time together, for example, "when I talked of all things coming to an end he would always laugh and say 'Hush – there's never any end when things are perfect'."

The intensity of emotion generated by war is exemplified by letters from Brooke's close friend, W. Denis Browne, the composer and King's scholar, who travelled with him to the Mediterranean and died at Gallipoli just a few weeks after the poet. His letter describes Brooke's burial in Skyros, 'one of the loveliest places on this earth, with grey-green olives round him, one weeping above his head: the ground covered with flowering sage, bluish grey & smelling more delicious than any other flower I know'.

Browne's account of waiting for the bombardment of the Dardanelles Straits to finish so that they could land was sent to Eddie Marsh in 1915; "This battle is the most wonderful thing there ever was. As heroic by land as it is wonderful by sea ... there's much of this that I'm glad Rupert did not see: and yet if only he could have seen it all. It is wonderful when you are away: when you are in it war is hateful and utterly horrible."

It is the inclusion of so many different sources and perspectives and also originals of texts that were later edited for public consumption that makes this collection such a valuable resource for researchers.

Time has not reduced the interest in Rupert Brooke. The joint King's College and Schroder Collections, will be the world's most significant archive of Rupert Brooke material, accessible for the first time, not just to scholars but to the interested public. A special section on the King's College website and an exhibition in the chapel are planned for later this year.

Kings is now actively seeking the remaining funds needed to fund the purchase. If you would like to be one of the contributors who help us acquire these manuscripts, donations can be made to the College Library through the [Munby Centenary Fund](#).

Events

2015 marks 500 years since the King's College Chapel stonework was completed, and the college is marking this milestone with a series of concerts, services and

performances marking each of the centuries. 1915 is celebrated with 'The Fateful Journey' on 26 April, a sequence of words and music devised to commemorate the centenary of the death of Kings' beloved alumnus Rupert Brooke en route to Gallipoli with friends and composers FS Kelly and Dennis Browne. This performance is written by Cambridge author Kate Kennedy and includes newly discovered unpublished songs; tickets are available from the King's College Visitor Centre. This special evening is part of a weekend festival to commemorate the life of Rupert Brooke – more information is available on [The Rupert Brooke Society website](#).