

# Notes

## ‘LAYS OF THE OCTOPODS (THE LAST OF THE OCTOPODS): AN UNPUBLISHED POEM BY EDWARD LEAR

An unpublished poem entitled ‘Lays of the Octopods (The Last of the Octopods)’ by artist, travel-writer, and poet, Edward Lear (1812–88) has come to light in the British Library’s Charnwood Autographs Collection.<sup>1</sup> The autograph manuscript is dated 22 September 1882, during the five-year period from 1878 to 1883 when Lear summered on Monte Generoso, a mountain bordering Italy and Switzerland. This finding offers a valuable addition to Lear’s poetic corpus and deals with Lear’s dissatisfaction with his surroundings in the busy tourist-filled Hotel Monte Generoso, fictionalized through a nonsensical lens. The seven stanzas contain many of the tropes and characters of Lear’s typical nonsense poetry, including octopods, elephants, and ducks. However, the poem is also an unusually morbid and lugubrious example of Lear’s verse:

### Lays of the Octopods (The last of the Octopods)

1  
From Monte Generoso  
When the leaves were turning brown  
Five hundred thousand Octopods  
All painfully came down  
And on the back of every one  
A Pofflikopp held fast,  
And all their faces dark or fair  
With sorrow were o’ercast.

2  
For months ago 8000 babes  
Had greedily partaken,

<sup>1</sup> Add MS 70949, f. 239., *Charnwood Autographs Collection*, British Library; The *Charnwood Autographs Collection* is a four-volume compilation of documents and letters, collected by Dorothea Mary Roby Benson (1876–1942), wife of Godfrey Rathbone, 1st Baron Charnwood (1864–1945). The date range of manuscripts spans from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries and includes letters from notable figures, including Alexander Pope, Amelia Opie, and Charlotte Brontë.

Of red=raw beef & brandy=buff  
with curried owls and bacon  
And,—said the Doctors Octopod,—  
“There can’t be any question  
That all these little innocents  
Have died of indigestion!”

3  
They sent for 90 Elephants  
From palmy Travaneore; –  
And when them Elephants arrived  
They sent for 90 more  
Upon those Elephants they tied  
The Coffins all with hay,  
And on each Coffin strapped a Duck  
To quack throughout the day –

4  
And then a down the mountain side  
All slowly they descended  
Till at the gates of great Milan  
The vast procession ended  
To Milan, as the sun went down  
In clouds of rosy flame  
Those Octopods & Pofflikopps  
In dust & sorrow came.

5  
Four million of stout Lombard men  
Came out to meet them all; –  
They said, “ – We cannot have them here!  
Our city is too small!  
And so they dug a fearful hole  
The city wall beside, –  
And all the Pofflikopps jumped in  
And ~~all were xxxxx~~ <quite oblivious> died.

6  
~~And all the Coffins & the ducks~~  
Five hundred thousand Octopods  
In tears, ~~likewise~~, all pale & thin  
Likewise the ~~ducks and Elephants~~ <coffins and the Ducks>  
Were thrown promiscuous in  
And lastly all the Elephants  
Majestically sad,  
Jumped on the top of all the rest  
With shrieks & grunts like mad.

7  
And as the Lombards filled the chasm  
They clashed their spades, & said  
“Of Octopods & Pofflikopps, –  
“Of ducks, alive or dead, –  
“Of Elephants with tusks & trunks  
“And skins all brown and rough,  
“Of all these things,” – the Lombards sang  
“Thank Heaven! We’ve had enough!”

Monte Generoso  
22<sup>d</sup> Sept<sup>er</sup> 1882  
—Edward Lear.

The poem is written in a letter to Mary Theresa Mundella (1847–1922), daughter of Liberal politician and friend to Lear, Anthony John

Mundella (1825–1897) who were also guests of the Hotel Monte Generoso. Sharing similarities with Lear's work 'The Octopods and Reptiles', in 'Lays of the Octopods', Lear also uses the symbol of the Octopod to represent the oppressive multitude of popular resorts. As Sara Lodge states, this word is often 'tellingly used to describe vulgar crowds at hotels, whose multiple legs presumably stood for their prolific families and their pestiferous spider-like manner of occupying space'.<sup>2</sup>

This is supported by a number of Lear's unpublished diary entries from 1882, which are held in the Houghton Library, Harvard University. The first of these, dated 11 September 1882, details his hatred of the noisy and over-full hotel he is staying in with the Mundellas, noting that 'there are about 115 people in the Hotel, with 3 waiters'.<sup>3</sup> A few days later, on 13 September, Lear writes out in full his well-known piece, 'The Octopods and Reptiles', a poem dealing with the frenetic, 'howly-gabbling' and 'most unpleasant flock' of holiday-makers.<sup>4</sup> Lear uses the description of guests as Octopods for the first time on 15 September, as he writes that he 'talks with various Octopods'.<sup>5</sup> He makes a similar comparison on 19 September, noting down that 'the horrible noise made by Octopod children is acutely horrid'.<sup>6</sup> Finally, on 23 September, Lear records in his diary his transcription of 'Lays of the Octopods', writing 'Came to my room & wrote out "Last of the Octopods" for M Mundella. But I became very unwell & slept'.<sup>7</sup> The reference to Milan in the poem is factual, as the city is visible from Monte Generoso on a clear day, and Lear travelled to Milan the day after writing 'Lays of the Octopods', arriving there 'by 11.45'.<sup>8</sup> In his poetry, Lear also uses the Octopod as insult

in 'Mr and Mrs Discobbolos', where the term is applied as an insult directed at Mrs Discobbolos by her husband, as he declares her a 'runcible goose' and 'Octopod Mrs Discobbolos'.<sup>9</sup>

Situated specifically on 'Monte Generoso', in autumn 'when the leaves were turning brown', a multitude of Octopods and 'Pofflikopps' descend from the mountain. They are described as 'o'ercast' 'with sorrow', foregrounding a melancholic inflection that begins in the opening stanza and continues throughout the poem. The overconsumption of tourists is referenced in the unsettling and gluttonous description of a rich feast of 'red-raw beef & brandy=buff/ with curried owls and bacon', resulting in a mass bout of indigestion and the death of '8000' infant Octopods.

The rest of the poem describes their funeral procession to the 'gates of great Milan', which features a number of mourners, including elephant pall-bearers and duck musicians, each strapped to a coffin to 'quack throughout the day'. The vast number of Octopods, which Lear numbers at 'five hundred thousand', soon encounter the Lombards of Milan, all 'four million' of whom declare that Milan is too small for further inhabitants. Their solution therefore is to dig a mass grave in which the 'oblivious' 'Pofflikopps', 'pale and thin' Octopods, coffins, ducks, and 'majestically sad' elephants are all thrown into. The denouement of the poem comes as the Lombards fill the grave and rejoice as they have 'had enough' of the crowd of other characters in the poem. The close of the poem is also the close of the letter, as Lear dates and signs his work, and on the address leaf directs the poem to 'Miss Mary Teresa Mundella'.

The 'Pofflikopp' in particular is a new addition to Lear's menagerie of nonsense animals. Separate from the Octopods, but sharing a connection, they accompany the creatures down the mountain by riding on their backs and are the first to sacrifice themselves. They seem to add to the sense of stifling

<sup>2</sup> Sara Lodge, *Inventing Edward Lear* (Massachusetts, 2019), 183.

<sup>3</sup> MS Eng 797.3 (25), 254, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>4</sup> MS Eng 797.3 (25), 256, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>5</sup> MS Eng 797.3 (25), 258, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>6</sup> MS Eng 797.3 (25), 262, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>7</sup> MS Eng 797.3 (25), 266, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>8</sup> MS Eng 797.3 (25), 267, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Lear, *The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (London, 1969), 250.

overcrowding evident in the work, alongside the more realistic ducks, elephants, and overpopulated city of Milan. Left undefined by Lear, 'Pofflikopps' are another strange fantastical creation like the 'Dong' of 'The Dong with a Luminous Nose', or the 'Quangle-Wangle' of 'The Quangle-Wangle's Hat' and 'The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World'. Unlike the Dong and the Quangle Wangle however, there are no illustrations accompanying this poem, further leaving Lear's 'Pofflikopp' creation as a

creature of the imagination. It is clear therefore that 'Lays of the Octopods' is a significant and important original work that adds to the oeuvre of Lear's nonsense poetry.

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