**Writers of Romney Marsh**

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A number of writers of the Edwardian era and the years between the World Wars chose to depict Romney Marsh in their work. Not least among them was [Henry James](/19c/19c-jamesh-hever-castle), who never featured the area in his novels but found the Marsh a very special place.

The Marsh itself evokes a ‘small thrill’ when Henry James sees ‘little lonely farms, red and gray, little mouse-coloured churches; little villages that seem made only for long shadows and summer afternoons … when summer deepens, the shadows fall, … you find in the mild English marsh a recall of the Roman Compagna’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Among those drawn to the Romney Marsh was [Joseph Conrad](/19c/19c-conrad-biography), who for a while lived at Aldington overlooking the Marsh. A much lesser-known novelist who wrote less literary works - Edgar Jepson - recalled a day spent in Dymchurch with Conrad and another acquaintance.

Jepson noted that they spent most of the afternoon ‘on Dymchurch wall, and they talked and talked of the number and colour of the funnels of steamers that came round Dungeness point and passed us, and of the number and colour of the rings round the funnels, for these told them which line they came from. . . it was a summer afternoon’. [[2]](#footnote-2)

Jepson and [Joseph Conrad](/19c/19c-conrad-biography), judging by their respective works, were not particularly enamoured of the Marsh - certainly the descriptions they give us tend towards the gloomy. In Jepson’s \_*The Murder in Romney Marsh\_* (1929) - a drug smuggling and murder mystery - he describes the Marsh as almost cheerful but then ‘a bank of heavy cloud drifted over its grey and drab flatness’ and when it became dark ‘it grew uncommonly eerie’ while in winter it is a ‘bleak and bitter place’. [[3]](#footnote-3) However he does admit that he could see ‘clear across the Marsh to the mist-wrapped hills … six or seven miles away’. He is at one with Conrad in his opinion of the inhabitants of the Marsh too. Jepson notes that the people of the Marsh are somewhat standoffish to strangers and view them as ‘foreigners’. [[4]](#footnote-4)

Conrad’s tale set on the Marsh is a short story entitled ‘Amy Foster’ (1901). The narrative tells of a man from the Carpathians who is the sole survivor of a shipwreck washed up on the shores at Dymchurch. Based on the 1775 wrecking of the \_*City of London\_*, which resulted in much loss of life Conrad’s tells a very gloomy tale of misery and ultimately death. The Marsh is a place of ‘gorgeous and sombre aspect’ where a ‘penetrating sadness … disengaged itself from the silence of the fields’. The people are ‘slow, unsmiling, with downcast eyes’ and above all totally unfriendly. The shoreline has a ‘dilapidated windmill’ with ‘shattered arms’ and a Martello tower ‘squatting at the water’s edge’[[5]](#footnote-5)

In *Kipps* (1905) [H. G. Wells’s](/20c/20c-wellshg-biography) picture of the Marsh is one seen through the eyes of young boys inhabiting an idyllic world:

There were glorious days of ‘mucking about’ along the beach, the siege of unresisting Martello towers, the incessant interest of the mystery and motion of windmills, the windy excursions with boarded feet over the yielding shingle to Dungeness lighthouse— far adrift from reality, smugglers and armed men from the moment they left Great Stone behind them—wanderings in the hedgeless reedy marsh, long excursions reaching even to Hythe, where the machine guns of the Empire are forever whirling and tapping . . . The sky in these memories was the blazing hemisphere of the marsh heavens in summer, or its wintry tumult of sky and sea; and there were wrecks, real wrecks, and there was bathing all naked in the sea, bathing to one's armpits and even trying to swim in the warm sea-water and the rare eating of dinner from a paper parcel miles away from home.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Radclyffe Hall in \_*The Sixth Beatitude\_* (1936) likewise depicts the Marsh as a unique and special place - ‘more than two miles of greyish-green marsh with … sheep and strong steers’[[7]](#footnote-7)… the Marsh had been ‘magicked by some hidden hand’, it looked an ‘unearthly green, and the river and dykes unearthly blue’. [[8]](#footnote-8) Hall provides us with closely observed pictures of the natural world of the Marsh:

A heron …heavy powerful wings beating with dignity, slender powerful legs stretched out stiffly behind him … Plovers circled and screamed above their young; moor-hens paddled in and out of the rushes; larks dropped like plummets then soared up and up, seeming to shatter themselves with singing; while the thorn trees … were so heavy with blossom that their boughs were hidden. [[9]](#footnote-9)

The Marsh is not without its romance though – ‘an August moon silvered the quiet water of the dykes … a patch of pale marsh mist lay like a ghost of the vanished sea’. [[10]](#footnote-10)

Russell Thorndike’s \_*Dr Syn\_* (1915) is a smuggling tale set on Romney Marsh. Thorndike was an actor and writer who had spent many holidays of his childhood with his, arguably more famous sister, Sybil Thorndike, at Dymchurch. Supposedly the exciting tale of daring do and smuggling came about as a distraction when the pair were in New York and someone was murdered outside their hotel. There is little descriptive writing of the Marsh but the eerie atmosphere of the Marsh at night is amply conveyed when on a ‘weird night’:

Everything was vivid - either very dark or very light. Such grass as they came to was black grass; such roadways as they crossed were white roads; the sky was brightly starlit, but the mountainous clouds were black; the edges of the great dyke sluices were pitch black, but the water and thin mud were silver steel, reflecting the light of the sky. [[11]](#footnote-11)

James, Henry.

[English Hours](<https://archive.org/details/englishhours1905jame/page/n11/mode/2up>). Boston: Houghton, 1905. First publication 1875.

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Thorndike, Russell. \_*Dr Syn\_*. London: Arrow, 1972. First publication 1915.

1. \_English Hours’ 314-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shail 387 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Murder in Romney Marsh 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Murder in Romney Marsh 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Amy Foster 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kipps 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Sixth Beatitude 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Sixth Beatitude 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Sixth Beatitude 61 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Sixth Beatitude 100 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dr Syn 52 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)