



## Sir Herbert Read

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**H**erbert Read was one of the most influential British art historians, critics, essayists, educationalists, philosophers and poets of the 20th century. Born in 1893 at Muscoates Grange Farm, four miles south of Kirkbymoorside, Herbert enjoyed an idyllic childhood, beautifully and vividly described in his autobiographical ‘Annals of Innocence and Experience’.

But things changed dramatically when in 1902 his father died and the farm had to be sold. Herbert was sent away to a boarding school near Halifax, where his only solace was the joy of reading. He left school at 15 for a job in a Leeds Bank and, largely through night school and the public library, passed matriculation exams. Thanks to a small legacy, he went to Leeds University to study law and economics, despite having a greater interest in arts, politics and poetry. Immediately after he finished university in 1914, war broke out.

Herbert joined the Green Howards and served as an officer, enjoying a career in the infantry which earned him both a Distinguished Service Medal and Military Cross. The horror of war – the ‘Annals’ contains a moving description of his encounter with a German officer who was also a learned academic – transformed him as a writer, and he began to produce a series of powerful poems that

established him as one of the leading War Poets.

Civilian life drew him to London and a Civil Service job, but his essays and articles in a variety of literary and arts magazines soon established his reputation as an expert on the visual arts. Part of a highly influential intellectual circle, he became among the first to recognise such major figures as T.S. Eliot, Henry Moore, Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth. He was for a long period a curator of the Victoria and Albert Museum, then Professor of Fine Art at Edinburgh, editor of the Burlington Magazine, and co-founder of the Institute of Contemporary Arts.

Among his many books and publications, ‘The Meaning of Art’ and ‘Education through Art’ went through several editions and had a huge influence on the teaching of arts and aesthetics by a whole generation of teachers and writers. Deeply influenced by the great Romantics, notably Wordsworth, Blake and Coleridge, Herbert Read believed, with Wordsworth, that “the child is father to the man” - in other words that our childhood experiences deeply shape and influence the adults we become. He also believed passionately in educating emotions and feelings as much as the intellect. He would have abhorred the extent to which teaching in England has marginalised the arts in favour of pressurised exam-dominated curricula. In his

understanding of the role of imagination and creativity in learning and motivation, and the need for different forms of democratic political agendas, much of Read's writing is as acutely relevant for our time as when it was written.

Despite his long residence elsewhere, the North Yorkshire Moors remained a powerful influence in his life and work. In 1935 he produced his remarkable novella, 'The Green Child', written in a genre we now call magic realism. His hero, Olivero, after becoming President of an obscure South American mountain republic through a series of accidents, returns to his native Yorkshire, a thinly disguised Ryedale. He follows an amazing reverse-flowing stream to an old watermill - based on the mill owned by Read's uncle at Hold Caldron in Kirkdale - and rescues a mysterious Green Child. Together they follow the stream to a deep pool on the moors to enter a mystical crystal cavern, where they find a republic based on Read's

own anarchistic ideals.

Herbert Read also came home for good in 1949, settling in Stonegrave, in the Howardian Hills, to continue his writing and teaching. He spent the rest of his life there. One of his favourite walks was along Hodge Beck to Bransdale Mill (now a National Trust-owned bunkhouse) which he described as his "spiritual hermitage, the 'bright jewel' to which I often retire in moods of despair". He died on 12th June 1968 and is buried with other members of his family in the graveyard of St Gregory's Minster, in Kirkdale, with its famous Anglo-Saxon sundial and inscription, so beautifully recalled in his poem 'Kirkdale':

*I, Orm the son of Gamal  
found these fractur'd stones  
starting out of the fragrant thicket.  
The river bed was dry.*



## Find out more

St Gregory's Minster, Kirkdale, Kirkbymoorside

There is no better introduction to Herbert Read's Yorkshire than the fine anthology of his writing 'Between the Riccall and the Rye', (Orage Press 2011).

'The Innocent Eye' by Herbert Read, is an autobiography of his childhood in Ryedale (first published 1933) which forms part of the "Annals of Innocence and Experience".



*St Gregory's Minster, Kirkdale*



*Sir Herbert Read*



*Saxon sundial, St Gregory's Minster*



*Gravestone, St Gregory's Minster*