

# Gerard Manley Hopkins

Angus Easson

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# Gerard Manley Hopkins

Gerard Manley Hopkins was among the most innovative writers of the Victorian period. Experimental and idiosyncratic, his work remains important for any student of nineteenth-century literature and culture.

This guide to Hopkins's life and work offers:

- a detailed account of Hopkins's life and creative development
- an extensive introduction to Hopkins's poems, their critical history and the many interpretations of his work
- cross-references between sections of the guide, in order to suggest links between texts, contexts and criticism
- suggestions for further reading.

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# Gerard Manley Hopkins

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**For Bernard**



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# Abbreviations and referencing

Throughout the text, references to the poetry are from *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), by line number of the poem. References to editorial matter in this edition are abbreviated as *P*.

Other abbreviations are:

- J*            *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Humphry House and Graham Storey (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).
- L*, 1        *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, ed. Claude Colleer Abbott (London: Oxford University Press, 1935, rev. 1955).
- L*, 2        *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*, ed. Claude Colleer Abbott (London: Oxford University Press, 1935, rev. 1955).
- L*, 3        *Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Claude Colleer Abbott (London: Oxford University Press, 1938, rev. 1956).
- S*            *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Christopher Devlin (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

All references to the Bible are from the Authorised Version, ed. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), the translation with which Hopkins would be familiar before his conversion.

For all other references the Harvard system is used, giving work and page number, e.g. (Thomas 1969: 15). Full details of items cited (by author's name and date of publication) can be found in the Bibliography.

Cross-referencing between sections is one of the features of the series. Cross-references to relevant page numbers appear in bold type and square brackets, e.g. [28].



# Introduction

Gerard Manley Hopkins is a rewarding and, if we are to get the best of him, a demanding poet.

It is possible to read him with much pleasure without having a detailed knowledge of his life, of his beliefs, and of the technical means by which he expressed his ideas and feelings. Hopkins, though, becomes a greater and more rewarding artist, the better we know and understand his love and study of nature, his doctrinal beliefs, and his technical innovations. In closely observing and recording nature, in prose as well as poetry, Hopkins developed a language to describe what he perceived – terms such as ‘inscape’ and ‘instress’ [pp. 27; 63]. He developed a poetic language and a new rhythm, which he named Sprung Rhythm [pp. 68–9]. And intimately and necessarily involved with his view of nature and his poetic innovation, are Hopkins’s doctrinal beliefs. It is not only that he became a Catholic, a Jesuit, and a priest. He was also deeply devoted to Mary as Mother of God, above all through the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception [p. 78], and he was deeply moved by the idea that the Incarnation itself, Christ coming as man to share humanity and to suffer, was part of a grand scheme of salvation, preceding the creation of the world [p. 134]. So all nature, as God’s creation, is to be explored, delighted in, and a means to perceive God in his creation and through it the beatific vision of God in his glory. It is not necessary to be a Catholic or even a Christian to enjoy Hopkins, but it is essential in reading the poetry to have an understanding of his beliefs.

This study, designed to explore and illuminate these issues and others, is progressive and cumulative. It begins with the life and contexts, passes to the work, both poetry and prose, and then surveys a range (necessarily only a selection) of critical responses to Hopkins, picking up and developing key issues, the often clashing

voices here enforcing the need to develop our own readings and responses.

In reading this study it is vital to have a complete and convenient edition of the poetry, including fragments and unfinished work, in chronological order. Catherine Phillips's edition [p. xv] includes all the poetry and a useful selection of prose. It should be to hand to explore the poetry and to test this study's claims in Part II and those of the critics in Part III. Anyone wishing to read at least some of the poetry before beginning this study might start with the first poems of mature production: might plunge into 'The Wreck of the *Deutschland*' and the sonnets that immediately followed; or 'The Wreck' and a selection that includes 'Felix Randal', 'Spring and Fall', 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves', 'That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire', and 'St Alphonsus Rodriguez'; or as an intriguing alternative, early poems, including 'The Escorial', 'A Vision of the Mermaids', 'The Alchemist in the City', 'Floris in Italy', 'The Nightingale', and then 'The Wreck'.

The reader of Hopkins needs to have a serious (not solemn) interest and delight in poetry. As a reader of Hopkins since 'A' Level, many years ago, I hope that this study will aid that interest and pleasure in the supreme poetic voice of Gerard Manley Hopkins.



# **Life and contexts**



## Introduction

Gerard Manley Hopkins was acclaimed in the twentieth century as amongst the greatest modern poets: his language and his poetic experiments spoke to a time, after the First World War, that rejected Victorian attitudes, Victorian poetry and Victorian poetic language. Yet, paradoxically, Hopkins had died in 1889, over a decade before the Victorian age ended and he was in many respects a true Victorian. In his life he was known as a promising student who became a Catholic and a Jesuit priest who, as he himself was all too aware, seemed to have achieved little and to have served God to little purpose, a man virtually unknown as a poet, his work unpublished until thirty years after his death. His poetic language and forms, his integration of nature, that great Romantic force, with the strict doctrines of Catholicism, made a new poetry, unlike that of Tennyson, Browning or Matthew Arnold. Hopkins indeed was compared to Walt Whitman, whose loose rhythms sought, like Hopkins's experiments, to forge new poetic forms. Accepting the comparison with the American poet, Hopkins also saw himself as startlingly like the man – a pity, he remarked, since Whitman was ‘a very great scoundrel’ (*L*, 1.155). That wry recognition of the ruffian in his own nature hints at Hopkins's sense of humour and a vein of self-deprecation in a man who saw himself clearly (not always quite liking what he saw). Outwardly, Hopkins's life is not obviously eventful, yet each phase proved deeply significant for his poetry, not least the long interval (1868–75) when he renounced poetic creation.

Three aspects in particular intertwine: friendship; conversion and priesthood; aesthetic theories and poetic achievement. Friendship helped on his conversion, gave him critical support in his poetry, and developed an emotional life that found poetic expression. Conversion

led to Catholicism and the Society of Jesus; to the tension between God and poetic creativity; and in the poetry itself both to the reconciliation of God with Nature and to an anguished sense of exclusion from God. Aesthetic theories and poetic development produced the astonishing representations of Nature and of God in Nature and the daring experiments in language and rhythm that baffled those of his contemporaries who ever knew them and caused this Victorian to be proclaimed a Modern in the twentieth century and to sustain him as a truly great poet in the twenty-first.

### **Early years 1844–63**

Gerard Manley Hopkins was born 28 July 1844 in Stratford, East London. His father, Manley Hopkins, was in marine insurance; his mother, Catherine, had married Manley Hopkins in 1843 and Gerard was the first of nine children. Eight years later, the family moved to Oak Hill Park, Hampstead (the house was destroyed in 1961). His family offered Gerard material and emotional comfort, stability, interests in music and drawing, and a firm grounding in religion. The family were High Church Anglicans, whose beliefs and worship were based on the Oxford or Tractarian Movement of the mid-nineteenth century [p. 10], which had rediscovered the truth of Catholic doctrines. Such doctrines were linked to ceremonial and ritual in church. High Anglicans also insisted upon the validity of Anglican orders, that is, that their ministers were endowed in unbroken line of succession from St Peter and the Apostles with the powers of the priest. This very closeness to the Catholic Church often led to extreme hostility, with accusations against those who became Catholics that they were ‘perverts’ to Romanism (the ‘Roman’ Catholic Church, so designated to identify it with the Pope of Rome and his claim to supreme and exclusive authority). This doctrinal security made Hopkins’s conversion easier, when the time came, but also increased the bitterness and sense of alienation for him and his family when he made his decision.

At first, though, Hopkins’s life was on the surface an ordinary middle-class one. After tuition and private school, from 1854 he went to Sir Roger Cholmley’s School, Highgate, where despite the incompetence of the headmaster, Dyne, a witless flogger, he got on well with other boys, was nicknamed ‘Skin’ (*L*, 3.394), and followed the usual kind of curriculum – the Classics, emphasis being laid on translation to and from Latin and Greek and the writing of verse in those languages; mathematics; and a modern language – Hopkins read and spoke French fluently. Amongst his masters, briefly, was

Richard Watson Dixon, ten years his senior, already a poet, whose poetry Hopkins came to admire greatly and with whom, from 1878, he was to maintain a friendship through correspondence. Later, Dixon remembered ‘a pale young boy, very light and active, with a very meditative & intellectual face’ (*L*, 2.4) – Hopkins’s own description (1887) adds hazel eyes and lightish brown hair. While active in games, he was already thoughtful, with an inward streak, curious about his own nature and that of others, what he described as the ‘taste of myself ... incommunicable by any means to another man (as when I was a child I used to ask myself: What must it be to be someone else?)’ (*S*, 123). If he could not enter readily into other natures, his meditations were to lead into the world’s mystery and the darker side of his own nature.

At Highgate school he showed an obstinacy, developed as determination, that was to be evident even at his lowest ebb. Hopkins bet another boy that he could abstain from all liquid. His tongue and lips black, he won the bet, only for the headmaster to intervene, beat both boys, and require Hopkins to return his winnings. Hopkins protested unavailingly: he had won, even if he were to be punished, while the other boy lost nothing. The strength of will demonstrated by liquid deprivation was seen by others: a fellow Jesuit recalled Hopkins as having ‘a strong manly will of his own’, adding that if ‘somewhat eccentric in his views and ways’, these ways were pleasing and many of them original (*J*, 421). And if Hopkins’s ‘eccentricity’ could put him at odds with his superiors, the strength of will carried him crucially his own way. At times, Hopkins’s self-assessment could be harsher than that of others: he is a scoundrel like Whitman or feels himself a blackguard (*L*, 1.139). Yet here and in his moments of blackness brought on by morbid self-scrutiny, it is important to recognise the edge of humour in such judgements or, with the late Retreat notes, their private nature. Certainly, such strength of character, obstinacy even, was necessary when he had to face his family at his conversion, to face the choices of priesthood and entry to the Jesuits, to face for the rest of his life the consequences of these decisions.

Outside school, Hopkins developed his interests in drawing, music, and language. Music developed his interest in rhythm and stress, while his Aunt Maria took him out sketching on Hampstead Heath. Though never a distinctive artist, the influence of Hampstead’s artistic communities and even more of John Ruskin, the great if eccentric critic of art and architecture, made him observe natural forms in detail. Under Ruskin’s insistence that we should ‘go to Nature in all singleness of heart ... having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning ... rejecting nothing, selecting