

VAN WAGENINGEN, LINDSAY AND OWEN ON HOUSMAN.
WITH TWO UNPUBLISHED LETTERS¹

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses two hitherto unpublished letters sent to J. van Wageningen by W.M. Lindsay and S.G. Owen, in which these scholars comment on the editorial methods of A.E. Housman.

KEYWORDS

*textual criticism, Manilius, J. van Wageningen,
W.M. Lindsay, S.G. Owen, A.E. Housman*

The history of classical scholarship is often written as a history of great scholars. In a field in which so much work still remains to be done, one needs to start somewhere. As a consequence, however, the careers of lesser-known figures are often only studied in relation to their more famous contemporaries.

The careers of S.G. Owen (1858–1940) and J. van Wageningen (1864–1923) are a case in point.² If modern scholars have heard of their names, it is probably because they function as supporting actors in the life of their more famous contemporary, A.E. Housman (1859–1936). They were on the receiving end of Housman’s most notorious put-downs: the former in Housman’s reviews of his OCT of Persius and Juvenal and that of Ovid’s exile poetry;³ the latter in the introduction to Housman’s Manilius V.⁴ The third leading figure of this note, W.M. Lindsay (1858–1937), admittedly has a bigger claim to independent fame, but it is

¹ I thank Tom Keeline and David Butterfield for their comments on an earlier version of this note, as well as the anonymous peer reviewers. Thanks are also due to the staff of the King’s College London Archives for their kind permission to print the two letters (see note 12 for the complete citation).

² See Irwin (2004) for biographical details on Owen; Vollgraff (1924–1925) for an obituary of Van Wageningen; Hall (1990) for his feud with Housman.

³ Housman (1903); (1915) respectively.

⁴ Housman (1930) xxvi–xxxii, some of which has become famous: ‘A reader new to the author and the editor might mistake van Wageningen for a man of learning’ (xxvii); ‘He does not shrink from open falsehood’ (xxxi); ‘[H]e lived from hand to mouth on the borrowed beliefs of the moment’ (xxxi).

nevertheless remarkable that he, unlike Housman, has never been the subject of a biography, and that the only recent piece of scholarship dealing with Lindsay specifically focuses on his relationship with his pre-eminent colleague.⁵

This note presents two hitherto unpublished letters, sent by Owen and Lindsay to Van Wageningen after the latter had sent them his review of Housman's *Manilius IV*. Its purpose is to offer an addition to current scholarship by showcasing contemporaneous views *about* Housman as opposed to *by* him. First, some context is in order.

Jacob van Wageningen, Professor of Latin in Groningen from 1902 to his death in 1923, was a typical exponent of Dutch classical scholarship at the start of the twentieth century. He and his contemporaries, all students of Cobet's either directly or at one remove, were primarily concerned with textual scholarship, both in the form of editions and that of textual notes, usually published in *Mnemosyne*. Within this scholarly community, polemics were rare. Even debate was sometimes frowned upon: Van Wageningen's contemporary J.J. Hartman (Professor of Latin in Leiden from 1891 until 1921), for instance, agreed to act as a co-founder of a Classics Society only on the condition that papers presented there would not be open for discussion afterwards.⁶ Reviews of new scholarly works, often published in the Dutch-language periodical *Museum* ('Journal for Philology and History'), tended to be phrased in civilized language.

For a member of this community, it must have been quite shocking to find a foreign colleague lambasting his colleagues in his academic prose as Housman did. This, at least, is the impression given by Van Wageningen's review of Housman's *Manilius IV* (1920) in *Museum*.⁷ Van Wageningen, himself a Manilian translator, editor and commentator,⁸ starts his review by commenting that 'Studying a work by Housman is not an entirely pleasant experience, for our admiration for the acuity of this scholar is considerably tempered by our annoyance at his sharp attacks on others with whom he disagrees or whom he believes he has caught in an inaccuracy.'⁹ Such rebukes, Van Wageningen writes, are uncalled for, especially in the light of what he sees as Housman's own failings:

⁵ Butterfield (2009).

⁶ Damsté (1924) 2. Hartman, incidentally, was held in some regard by Housman: he is called 'worthy' in a letter to Phillimore (see Cameron (1985)). See Van der Velden (2020) for more on Hartman.

⁷ Van Wageningen (1921a).

⁸ Van Wageningen (1914); (1915); (1921b) respectively.

⁹ Van Wageningen (1921a) 173. I have translated Van Wageningen's Dutch.

misreports of the manuscript evidence and a spate of unconvincing conjectures. He reminds Housman of the phrase ‘and why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye? [Matthew 7:1–5]’, which he cites in English.¹⁰

Van Wageningen must have felt so strongly about his review that he sent it to scholars abroad, notwithstanding the fact that it was written in Dutch. Among the recipients were Housman himself,¹¹ W.M. Lindsay (with whom Van Wageningen appears to have already been in correspondence regarding palaeographical matters, as shown by the last paragraphs of his letter), and S.G. Owen (who, Van Wageningen must have thought, would surely support him in his criticism of his enemy). Replies by the latter two have been preserved.¹²

Lindsay to Van Wageningen:

2 Windmill Park
St Andrews
Scotland
19-V-21

Dear Professor,

Your review of Housman has just come. Prof. Housman! He has been castigated recently by Postgate and by Garrod,¹³ and you now reveal to him some of his errors — the same errors for which he blames others! You foreigners will not understand why he is so well liked in England. But if you understand English well enough to read and fully comprehend his poem “The Shropshire Lad”, you will sympathize. It is an excellent poem and reveals the excellent character of the author.

¹⁰ Van Wageningen (1921a) 174.

¹¹ As mentioned in Housman (1921) 175. He probably sent the review through Housman’s publisher Grant Richards; see Richards (1941) 185.

¹² The letters (the transcripts of which adopt a slightly different paragraphization for the sake of legibility) can be found in the King’s College London Enk Collection (K/PP108/ENK(HARTMAN)/Hartman Bundle), the collection of papers bequeathed, together with his Classics library, to King’s College by Groningen Professor of Latin P.J. Enk (1885–1963). This collection also contains correspondence, lecture scripts, and various kinds of notes of the Leiden Professor of Latin J.J. Hartman (1851–1924), who was Enk’s *Doktorvater* and much revered by him (see also note 6). Even though the letters are kept together with Hartman’s correspondence, it seems unlikely that they were ever in Hartman’s possession: he only survived Van Wageningen by a few months. Enk himself must have obtained them after Van Wageningen’s passing.

¹³ Postgate (1921); Garrod (1921).

His language in criticism is, I presume, modelled on Bentley's. Let us congratulate ourselves that it is not modelled on that of the Renaissance scholars. If it were, Housman would not be satisfied with ascribing to those who differ from him merely "crass stupidity". He would charge them with unmentionable crimes!

To me his articles give great amusement — not because of the violence of his abuse, but because of the delicious contrast between his professions and his performance. He assumes the rôle of a Scaliger; but he displays woeful ignorance every now & then, which does not suit that rôle. Still, I have no right to assume this superior tone. Housman has made more brilliant emendations than anyone except Buecheler. Five per cent of his emendations are absolutely certain — and that is a large proportion.¹⁴

I enclose a list of Liebaert's negatives. I have had 2000 copies of the list printed for advertisement. If you can suggest to me a good plan for letting Dutch palaeographers know about the Liebaert collection (and the new facilities for getting photographs of Latin script of Latin miniatures), I shall be grateful. (The collection belongs to the Vatican Library). Otherwise do not take the trouble of replying.¹⁵

I am trying to found a Journal of Latin Palaeography, but the expense of printing is now so huge, that the attempt may not succeed.¹⁶

Very truly yours
W.M. Lindsay

¹⁴ Lindsay (1921) 30 provides context for this number: 'my own respect for the pages of conjectural emendations in our classical journals was shattered when I had to edit Plautus and Martial and found that not one in a hundred of these random suggestions could be mentioned by a self-respecting editor'.

¹⁵ The reference is to the Belgian palaeographer Paul Liebaert (1883–1915), librarian at the Vatican Library, whose collection of unpublished negatives is also mentioned by Lindsay in his obituary (Lindsay (1915)).

¹⁶ Lindsay would succeed in founding his journal, which would be called *Palaeographia Latina* (1922–1929).

Owen to Van Wageningen:

May 22

My dear Sir,

I am most obliged to you for your interesting review of Housman's *Manilius IV*. Being unable to read Dutch I have waited to write to you till I had procured a translation of it, which I now have. You have performed a public service in pointing out that this modern Bentley, as he thinks himself (quantum mutatus ab illo! [Ver. *Aen.* 2.274]) is by no means free from the inaccuracies and want of care, with which he is so fond of charging other people, in language more worthy of a bargee than a scholar. As regards to false reports of readings of manuscripts given by Housman I am not surprised, for his method has always been to use the apparatus criticus and collations of other scholars, without doing the work himself

inmunisque sedens aliena ad pabula fucus [Ver. *Georg.* 4.244], and then to endeavour to destroy the reputation of them without whose work he could have done nothing.

Again thanking for your review I remain

Yours very truly

S G Owen

Noteworthy is the frankness with which these two scholars state their views on their colleague, which should perhaps be explained by the fact that they were writing to a relative outsider. Of the two letters, Lindsay's is perhaps the more surprising, and not only because of the laudatory elements it contains.¹⁷ It adduces Housman's poetry as an extenuating factor for the blunt rhetoric of his academic work, and thereby blurs the distinction between the two sides of Housman which his contemporary critical reception usually kept apart. Moreover, his professed admiration for Housman's talents in conjectural criticism appears slightly at odds with the disapprobation with which he viewed that pursuit in general, and Housman as a prime exponent of it.¹⁸ Owen's remarks, disparaging in nature, are rather less remarkable. Van Wageningen must have been

¹⁷ Perhaps this letter can be read as a corrective to the view that Lindsay did not really approve of Housman until the end of the 1920's; see Butterfield (2009) 204–5. But of course, Lindsay's letter mixes the sweet with the bitter.

¹⁸ For this last point, see Butterfield (2009), esp. 202.

pleased with, but not surprised by, the support expressed by his colleague.¹⁹

Van Wageningen had ended his review with the wish that ‘soon, in interpreting the fifth book [of Manilius], Housman will also serve as a good guide in the interpretation but then by the years *ex Truculento factus lepidus*.’²⁰ It was not to be: *truculentus* would be an understatement for Housman’s treatment of Van Wageningen in the introduction to his *Manilius V* (1930).²¹ Hall discusses the feud in detail: as its origin he sees the lack of attention paid to Housman’s work on Manilius in Wageningen’s 1915 Teubner edition, as exemplified by the critical apparatus which lists few of Housman’s conjectures.²² If this is the case, it is remarkable that Housman waited fifteen years before unleashing his attack. Van Wageningen had no option of responding with a review this time: he had passed away seven years before.

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¹⁹ Van Wageningen was working on his commentary on Manilius (Van Wageningen 1921b) around this moment in time. It is possible that Lindsay and/or Owen were aware of this, and that they may have intended to stimulate Van Wageningen to publish his criticisms of Housman in his commentary as well (which, written in Latin, would be more conspicuous to the international scholarly community than his Dutch *Museum* review article). I owe this suggestion to David Butterfield.

²⁰ Van Wageningen (1921a) 177.

²¹ See note 4 above.

²² Hall (1990) 67–71. According to his obituarist (Vollgraff (1924–1925) 12), Van Wageningen had originally prepared a much more expansive critical apparatus but had been forced by Teubner to trim it down.

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Very truly yours

W. M. Lindsay

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