

Saki / H.H. Munro
1870-1916

Bios

<http://www.litgothic.com/Authors/saki.html>



Up to now, little has been known about Hector Hugh Munro except that he used the pen name “Saki”; that he wrote a number of witty short stories, two novels, several plays, and a history of Russia; and that he was killed in World War I. His friend Rothay Reynolds published “A Memoir of H. H. Munro” in Saki’s *The Toys of Peace* (1919), and Munro’s sister Ethel furnished a brief “Biography of Saki” for a posthumous collection of his work entitled *The Square Egg and Other Sketches* (1924). A. J. Langguth’s *Saki* is the first full-length biography of the man who, during his brief writing career, published a succession of bright, satirical, and sometimes perfectly crafted short stories that have entertained and amused readers in many countries for well over a half-century.

Hector Munro was the third child of Charles Augustus Munro, a British police officer in Burma, and his wife Mary Frances. The children were all born in Burma. Pregnant with her fourth child, Mrs. Munro was brought with the children to live with her husband’s family in England until the child arrived. Frightened by the charge of a runaway cow on a country lane, Mrs. Munro died after a miscarriage. Since the widowed father had to return to Burma, the children — Charles, Ethel, and Hector — were left with their Munro grandmother and her two dominating and mutually antagonistic spinster daughters, Charlotte (“Aunt Tom”) and Augusta. This situation would years later provide incidents, characters, and themes for a number of Hector Munro’s short stories as well as this epitaph for Augusta by Ethel: “A woman of ungovernable temper, of fierce likes and dislikes, imperious, a moral coward, possessing no brains worth speaking of, and a primitive disposition. Naturally the last person who should have been in charge of children.” Because of Hector’s delicate health as a child, he escaped such beatings as were generously administered to Charles. Mischievous and sly as a small boy, Hector as he grew older and even as a man sometimes indulged in practical jokes whose flavor often resembled that which spices his stories.

In 1893 Hector Hugh Munro returned to Burma to join the police force in a position gained through his father’s influence. However, the young man suffered so severely from malaria (seven bouts of fever) that he returned to England in 1894. Following his convalescence, Munro moved to London in 1896.

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Determined to become a writer, he published his first book in 1900 (the only one under his real name), a serious history called *The Rise of the Russian Empire*. The book romantically pictures a Russia that Munro was not to see until as a foreign correspondent he lived in St. Petersburg (now Leningrad) in 1904. The reviews of his history disappointed Munro. He then adopted his pen name, Saki, from the cupbearer in Edward FitzGerald's *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1859). Wisely, as it turned out, he shifted his writing to political satire and parody, in which he collaborated with a popular cartoonist, Carruthers Gould. Parodies of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1859), published in *Westminster Gazette*, drew attention to the writer who signed himself "Saki."

Langguth comments on Munro's choice of the name by which he would be remembered. "He was young and merry and bright," says Langguth, but he was also old and sad and cruel. It was Hector who would write the best of the stories; it was Munro who would go off to war. But the name of Saki could stand for both of them — for Hector when he passed on his joyous errand among the guests, for Munro when he sought the cup [of death] at the river-brink. In *Omar Khayyam*, Hector Munro found an ambiguous pseudonym more appropriate than he could know.

In keeping with this view of Munro, Langguth refers to him as Hector until the more serious and seemingly fatalistic side of his nature begins to predominate. From 1913 to the end he is usually called Munro.

The publication in 1902 of *Alice in Westminster* (with Carruthers Gould's cartoons) was both a critical and a popular success. Munro's conservative political views influenced his acceptance of an offer from the *Tory Morning Post* to write as a foreign correspondent, and during the next six years he sent news articles to London from the Balkans, Russia, and Paris.

Munro had begun his writing career by imitating Gibbon. He had parodied Lewis Carroll and the Edward Fitzgerald translation of the *Rubaiyat*, and in 1902 he published several parodies of Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* (1902). In September, 1901, though, Munro introduced to readers a character of his own invention, a young dandy and social butterfly named Reginald who was to become the protagonist of a series of fifteen stories collected and published in book form under the title *Reginald*. The popularity of Reginald as a character led to the publisher's entitling Munro's next book *Reginald in Russia* (1910) despite the fact that Reginald appeared only in the title story.

The Reginald stories, as many of their titles suggest, usually depend less upon plot or other narrative characteristics than upon Reginald himself and his opinions or observations, which are by turns impudent, rude, sardonic, and irreverent. The satire is often directed at British stuffiness and pretense.

The two Reginald books were published by Methuen & Company. The first received several favorable reviews; little attention was paid to the second. Neither volume brought much money to Munro, and he switched to John Lane, who published all six of his remaining books, including the two posthumous ones, *The Toys of Peace* and *The Square Egg and Other Sketches*.

Fluent in French, German, and Russian, Saki traveled to the Balkans, Russia, Poland, and France as a foreign correspondent for the *Morning Post* from 1902 to 1908. While in St. Petersburg he witnessed "Bloody Sunday" and the Russian Revolution of 1905. Working as a freelance writer following his return to England in 1908, he continued to write short stories while publishing in the *Bystander* and the *Daily*

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Express. The Unbearable Bassington, his first novel, appeared in 1912 and was a scathingly accurate social satire written in a style reminiscent of Oscar Wilde. His second novel, When William Came, was less well received critically and served primarily to warn complacent Britons of Germany's aggressive intentions prior to World War I.

During his ten most successful years as a writer, from 1904 to 1914, Saki published four volumes of short stories, many notable for their clever dialogue, odd animals and settings, and startling surprise endings. The Chronicles of Clovis (1911) had only a modest sale, but the volume of twenty-eight stories contained several which were later to be anthologized as classics of modern British short fiction. In "Tobermory" a talking cat wreaks havoc by revealing secrets about men and women at a house party in a fashionable home. "Mrs. Packletide's Tiger" employs a blackmail scheme by which Louisa Mebbin gains a pleasant cottage in Dorking through a threat to tell the true story of Mrs. Packletide's attempt to outshine Loona Bimberton socially.

Saki's short stories remained popular throughout the twentieth century, largely because of their sparkling wit and sharp humor; they are what have earned him a place in literature. Dealing frequently with unconventional subjects, practical jokes, or the supernatural, they seldom obey modern rules of realism.

Romantic idealism spurred Saki toward his last great adventure in 1914. Munro was angered by the agitations of British pacifists, and in an article in Outlook he wrote, "If these men are on the side of the angels, may I always have a smell of brimstone about me." The article, Langguth says, reveals "the moralist hidden within the satirist. Once freed, this scourge and scold could never be cajoled into taking up again with raillery and innuendo."

As soon as World War I broke out, though he was over the age limit, he enlisted in the army. He managed to join a newly created cavalry unit called the 2nd King Edward's Horse but soon transferred to the 22nd Royal Fusiliers, serving with that combat unit for a year in France. At least twice he refused an officer's commission and safer duty to serve as a German interpreter, preferring to remain a common soldier on the front lines. He rose from private to corporal and, though he was in his forties, he retained good health despite the rigors of trench life.

He would probably have relished the sudden drama which ended his life in November, 1916. His company had been sent out of the trenches in early morning darkness near Beaumont Hamel. During a lull in the roar of guns, a soldier lighted a cigarette. Munro said, "Put that bloody cigarette out." Hearing the words, a sniper fired and the British Saki quaffed at last the "darker Drink" from the goblet offered by the Persian wine bearer whose name he bore. He was forty-six. Many years later Ethel Munro wrote a correspondent, "I am thankful that Saki did not live to be old; he hated the thought of old age. . . ."

Langguth points out that the blackmail or exposure theme appears in several Munro stories. Munro knew that he himself could have been the object of exposure threats if anyone had been tempted to try. Briefly supplying some information about her brother to an American correspondent in 1952, Ethel declared: "One subject he never wrote on, was sex, and I am certain if he had he would have made fun of it. The best way to treat it." There was a reason why he might have chosen not to write about sex: he was homosexual. He could create young men like Reginald in the early stories and Clovis Sangrail in later

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ones, whose mannerisms and waspish tongues might, for many readers of later generations anyway, suggest possible irregular sexual proclivities. He did not need to court trouble for himself, however, by treating a theme that might have drawn too much attention to his own proclivities.

Langguth reports that word had quietly spread about Munro's interest in young men. John Lane published Munro's books and also those of Oscar Wilde — whose love affair with young Lord Alfred Douglas had led to Wilde's disgrace and a prison term. Lane knew more about Munro's sexuality than he wanted the general public to know. According to Langguth, "When anyone raised the topic around Lane, he put his hands over his ears and pretended not to hear."

If Ethel divined any special significance in her brother's frequent references to young men in his letters to her from several countries during his years as a foreign correspondent, she apparently paid little attention. It is possible, though, that some of the many letters she destroyed might have revealed more about his sexual preferences than he would have wanted known. In her "Biography of Saki," when she quotes an excerpt from one letter she remarks that it was written "when he was chumming with a friend, one Tocke." Writing of his stay in St. Petersburg, she again mentions "a friend who was chumming with him." She does not specify the degree of "chumminess," but Langguth says that it sometimes included live-in arrangements.

To Langguth, Munro's bringing Turkish baths into several stories suggests "unmistakable first-hand knowledge." He may at times have gone to such baths seeking male partners. Langguth also reads a possible sexual meaning into some cryptic squiggles in the margin of a number of pages in Munro's diary, and he suspects that a lover is being protected by a nickname in the dedication of *The Chronicles of Clovis*: "To the Lynx Kitten, with His Reluctantly Given Consent, This Book is Affectionately Dedicated. H. H. M." Apparently, until the appearance of Langguth's biography, Munro's sexual inclinations, though known by numerous friends and acquaintances, were kept discreetly hidden from the public.

With a collection of clever parodies and three books of short stories that displayed his wit and verbal adroitness, Munro had demonstrated by 1911 that he was a master of the brief literary narrative. Then, like many another short story writer before and since, he was pressured into writing a novel. The result was *The Unbearable Bassington* (1912), which Langguth calls only a "half-success." At least Munro showed in it that he was more than a mere comic writer.

This novel was followed in 1913 by *When William Came*, a brief novel picturing an England that has been defeated by Kaiser William's Germany in a war which was won through a superiority in ground and air forces. The novel is chiefly memorable for its prophecy of the catastrophic and, for most people, unexpected war which began in 1914.

It is for his stories that Munro is read and remembered today; his fourth collection, *Beasts and Super-Beasts* (1914) — its title a take-off of George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman* (1903) — contains among its thirty-six tales several that show him in top form. "The Open Window," probably the most frequently reprinted of Saki's writings, is an artful blend of humor and a ghost-story theme. In "The Schartz-Metterklume Method," mischievous Lady Carlotta, seizing a sudden opportunity to impersonate a governess, employs engaging inventiveness as she entertains herself in carrying out Mrs. Quabarl's instruction to teach four young boys and girls so as to make them "interested in what they learn." "The Lumber-Room" gives Munro one of several literary opportunities, long delayed, to get revenge on his Aunt Augusta for her treatment of the Munro children. Several stories carry over from *The Chronicles of*

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Clovis variations on the werewolf theme and a curious streak of cruelty which today might pique the interest of a psychiatrist.

If, as a result of Langguth's revealing and appreciative biography, Munro's collected stories enjoy a revival, it will be one they richly deserve. Although they present characters, scenes, and action belonging to Edwardian England, the best of them display a nimble wit, high spirit, and a linguistic virtuosity that are timeless.

[Munro: more background](#)

Munro's pen name, Saki, belongs to a character out of the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám (1859), who is cupbearer to the gods. After the failed attempt at writing popular history, Munro began writing short sketches that satirized the hierarchical, stable, and largely aristocratic Edwardian society that he knew. Most of his early work, like *The Westminster Alice* sketches and the animal fables patterned after the *Just So Stories* (1902) of Kipling, drew heavily on the writings of other popular British authors of the period. The high style which became a hallmark of his writing recalled such literary figures as [Oscar Wilde](#) and [Max Beerbohm](#). Munro soon ended his stylistic apprenticeship and developed a distinctive literary voice for which he is still remembered.

His first literary efforts were almost exclusively in the short, topical sketch with a political theme. His editor at the *Westminster Gazette*, J. A. Spender, employed Munro's talents to criticize the government for its inept handling of the Boer War and other follies of the late empire. In addition to the original Alice figure, Munro created other characters to satirize the period. The first of the gilded youth portraits, as they came to be known, were the *Dolly Dialogues*, in which, through the eyes of a privileged, rather silly young woman, Munro ridiculed London's best people through a series of shrewd observations of their social conventions. His next series was filtered through the consciousness of the well-heeled, amusing, if somewhat mentally dim Reginald, a character who provided the model for [P. G. Wodehouse's](#) later, more benign, Bertie Wooster. Munro enjoyed a huge reputation as a social satirist, and his sketches were collected into best-selling books. As a teenager, Noël Coward discovered Reginald during a stay in the country and was forever indebted to Munro for helping to launch his career.

Munro quickly perfected an arch style and a trenchant social perspective, but he was unwilling to settle for a literary career based solely on light, ephemeral material, so he signed on as a foreign correspondent, taking assignments which would send him to many of the trouble spots of Europe. His travels exposed him to hardships and dangers that did much to alter the tone of his work. In addition, he was also introduced to the rich tradition of European folk literature, which supplied him with both the subject matter and the darker vision that characterizes the best of his later fiction.

From the time Munro returned to England in 1907 until his untimely death in World War I, he wrote an extraordinary number of excellent short stories that bear the stamp of his travels and for which he is best remembered. They are more direct and more heavily plotted than his earlier fiction. Much of the epigrammatic wit and the high style of Munro's earlier work is replaced by a deeper sense of irony and of a darker vision of human nature. Munro's later stories deal with an absurdity in life that is more modern than the topical flippancy of his earlier work. The tales in *Reginald in Russia* (1910), for example, though they resurrect his earlier character, are more somber in tone and subject than are the earlier

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pieces. As his career progressed, Munro also wrote more about the supernatural. Although humor is often still present in his later stories it is more subdued and ironic.

The two novels he wrote during this period reflect a changed mood. *The Unbearable Bassington* is more scathing than lighthearted. Although the unbearable Bassington at times reminds readers of Reginald, Bassington seems more in tune with Evelyn Waugh's doomed, 1920's bright young things than he does with anyone experiencing the peaceful, endless Edwardian summer. Munro describes the story as having no moral. It is a tale of evil with no remedy. Maurice Baring, in his introduction to the collected novels, calls it a tragedy, a story of a wasted life of ingrained egotism and lack of consideration, a life which must find its retribution in an isolated death. The bleakness of the ending transforms Munro's stock comic punch line into tragic emptiness. *The Unbearable Bassington* is Reginald and Dolly and Clovis Sangrail, Saki's later version of Reginald, with consequences.

When William Came is propaganda, pure and simple. As with *The Unbearable Bassington*, all the author's keen social observation is still there but without the wit and humor. The social criticism is more savage, the personal observations more heartless, and the characters come off badly and not amusingly. This novel is like one of Munro's more pungent short stories, expanded. It reads more like George Orwell than Oscar Wilde.

Munro is an underrated writer. Too often he has simply been categorized as among the lightweight British authors whose work is beyond serious consideration. On closer inspection, however, much of what he wrote has the unmistakable mark of the modernist literary tradition. His prose is much less dated, especially in the later stories, than is usually supposed. Munro's fiction deals with many of the modern subjects, such as irrationality, alienation, and irony. He also stylistically experimented with the well-made story, pushing that form to its limits and extending its potential. How he would have developed as a writer after the war remains, unfortunately, speculation. Whatever potential for literary growth his talent possessed expired with him on a field in France.

Reginald **First published:** 1904

Type of work: Short stories

Reginald, a wealthy, dim-witted man-about-town, makes satirical comments on contemporary social and cultural institutions.

Reginald was Saki's third book and, like *The Westminster Alice*, was a collection of the author's satiric newspaper pieces. With *Reginald*, Saki greatly broadened the scope of his commentary on the social world of Edwardian Britain.

In many of the short sketches, Reginald and the anonymous narrator attend various social and cultural events, such as the theater, the Royal Academy of Art, or a garden party, and Reginald makes satirical comments to the narrator. In the style of Oscar Wilde and Max Beerbohm, most of his remarks are epigrammatic and often are quite biting.

In addition to social institutions, Munro also targeted for send-ups such topics as the empire, the fiscal question, the Boer War, religion, and peace poems. A good number of these topics are rather obscure to

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the modern reader, but Reginald's commentary is still fresh because it pokes fun at such human traits as vanity, snobbishness, and hypocrisy.

"Reginald Goes to the Academy" provides an excellent example of how the stories work. In it, Reginald goes to the Royal Academy of Art, and he comments on various patrons and paintings. People at art museums look at the pictures, Reginald remarks, only when they have run out of conversation or if they want to avoid acquaintances. Noting that the Royal Academy is slow to admit painters, Reginald muses that one can see them arriving for years like "a Balkan trouble or a street improvement." On the large size of so many academic paintings, he says, "by the time they have painted a thousand or so square yards of canvas, their work begins to be recognized." Reginald also philosophizes about life: "To be clever in the afternoon argues that one is dining nowhere in the evening," and "I hate posterity — it's so fond of having the last word."

These small sketches reveal Saki's penchant for the amusing aside as well as the cutting remark. The pieces are delicate and rely heavily on literary style for their effect, which makes them difficult to paraphrase or summarize. Such clever ephemera, however, established Saki's reputation for wit and insight and made him a model for later twentieth century satirical writers, such as Waugh and Wodehouse.

When William Came **First published:** 1913

Type of work: Novel

Murrey Yeovil, after recuperating from an illness in Siberia, returns to Great Britain to find that the country has been conquered by the Germans, who now occupy and run it.

When William Came is one of a handful of literary works published before the outbreak of World War I that warned of the dangers of British isolationism. Like Guy du Maurier's popular melodrama, *The Englishman's Home* (1909), and Erskine Childer's *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903), Saki's novel is a cautionary tale about British military unpreparedness and the need to pay more serious attention to European affairs, especially to German militarism. Saki championed the cause of universal military training in Great Britain, and he wanted to shock those in power out of their smugness and their false sense of security. Like the other prewar jeremiads, *When William Came* took on an increased importance as prophecy in the aftermath of World War I.

The plot of the novel is fairly straightforward, if episodic. Murrey Yeovil is a typical Saki hero, wealthy, upper-class, conservative, British. While hunting in Siberia, he falls ill with malaria, and while recuperating learns of Great Britain's defeat by the Germans. He returns to London, where he finds life pretty much carrying on as usual except that the Germans are in command. On the surface, very little has changed except that the street signs are bilingual, and there are more Germans about. Most of British society has been left alone. Murrey finds that most of his friends have adapted quite well to their conquerors and mingle with them amiably. He grows disgusted with the acquiescence of the British, especially the upper classes, in their acceptance of their occupation.

Murrey is finally prompted to action by a series of events that begin with the decree barring all Britons from military training. He sees this as a deliberate attempt to weaken the British and to reduce the possibility for future resistance to the Germans. On a trip he discovers groups of patriots nestled in the

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English countryside who have not yet succumbed to the will of the new government. Emboldened by his discovery, he returns to London to witness the passive resistance of a troop of boy scouts, which confirms his suspicion that the youth of Great Britain offer the only hope for future rebellion against the invaders. The novel ends on this somewhat optimistic note.

Beasts and Super-Beasts **First published:** 1914

Type of work: Short stories

This collection of short fiction includes stories from the immediate prewar period of Saki's career.

Beasts and Super-Beasts was the last collection of Saki's short fiction published in his lifetime. According to some critics, it is his best. It contains the most representative of his later short stories. The book includes the stories for which Saki is now remembered. A number of the stories feature Clovis Sangrail, Saki's later version of Reginald. There are also a number of ghost or fantasy tales that provide an eerie, unworldly atmosphere. There are some tales that explore the demoniac side of childhood. Most of these short stories have ironic, surprise endings.

The witty commentary that Saki uses to such effect in his earlier short fiction is still present, but the stories in Beasts and Super-Beasts rely more on plot than do his earlier efforts. They also establish Saki's reputation for writing about the dark side of human nature. Twenty-first century readers will probably be less shocked by these tales than the prewar audience for which they were written because the stories' bleakness has become a staple of modern writing. It is to Saki's credit that he pioneered such a modernist vision. The stories seem less dated than some of his other ones.

In "The Story-Teller," a confirmed bachelor quiets some unruly children in a railway compartment by telling them a story. The story is about a little girl who wins medals for her goodness and is eaten by a wolf. She tries to escape the wolf by hiding in some bushes, but her medals clank, giving away her hiding place. There are also stories that border on the absurd. For example, in "The Stalled Ox," an artist who paints portraits of livestock is called to remove an ox from a neighbor's drawing room. Instead, he paints the beast and creates a sensation at the Royal Academy of Art with his picture, "Ox in a Morning-Room, Late Autumn." "The Dreamer" is about a distracted young man who looks so much like a retail clerk that he is able to sell things to customers in shops that he visits with his aunt. He pockets the money he receives for the goods. A gourmand in "The Blind Spot" covers up a killing committed by his cook because, although the cook may be a murderer, he is a great cook.

The absurdity and somberness of Saki's last stories reveal the modernist tendencies of his writing. The horrors of World War I and the worldwide Depression that followed, not to mention the terrors that the Nazis inflicted on Saki's country, perhaps have better provided his later audiences with a more appropriate worldview for appreciating Saki's work.

Summary

Saki is often depicted as a minor satirist of the Edwardian period, and his writing is usually described, disparagingly, as being in the same vein as Wodehouse's: witty, airy, and tame. On closer inspection it is possible to detect in the darker nature of his prose a growing alienation from modern life that surfaced more fully in literature of the 1920's. There is a bite, an edge, and a dislocation of reality in the best of

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his work that should place him among the forerunners of the generation of British writers who produced the modernist literary movements.

Discussion Topics

- What were Saki's specific charges against British foreign policy at the time of the Boer War?
- How did Saki's experiences as a foreign correspondent alter his writing?
- Trace the development of Saki's character called Reginald, then Clovis, over a series of his works.
- Is Saki's humor characteristically satirical or is it more broadly based?
- In what respects was Saki a writer ahead of his time?

Essay by: Charles L. P. Silet

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