

Edward Lear & Knowsley Hall

The 13th Earl of Derby, Lord Stanley (1775-1851), was devoted to Zoology. The natural history collection at Knowsley Hall was easily the finest in the country, occupying 100 acres of land and 70 acres of water.



Self portrait

The young Lord Stanley was president of the Zoological and Linnean Societies, and had conservatories, aviaries and animal sheds built around his father's estate. In his museum he had 318 species of birds and 94 species of mammals. He also had a large collection of fishes, reptiles and eggs. His menagerie was reported to have cost £10,000 and was managed by 30 keepers.

Lord Stanley wanted to catalogue his collection and build a record for classification. He met Edward Lear in 1831, when Edward was 20 years old and drawing parrots for John Gould, the Zoological Society's taxidermist. Lord Stanley was so impressed by the young artist's work, he immediately invited Edward to Knowsley Hall to produce illustrations of his collection.

Lear mixed with "half the fine people of the day", establishing a network of patronage on which he was to depend for the rest of his life. Most of his finest bird paintings were done at Knowsley Hall.

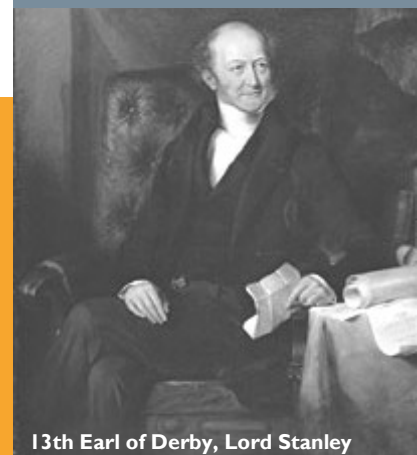
He worked on and off at Knowsley for over 7 years, but the detailed art work damaged his already poor eyesight and the bad weather affected his lungs. He had also suffered from epilepsy since childhood.

In 1840 Lear burned his diaries describing his years at Knowsley, but he never lost touch with the family. Even after the 13th Earl died, both the 14th and 15th Earls continued to commission work. Lear wrote in 1833 "Lord Derby is always employing me in one way or another, as did his father, his grandfather and his great grandfather. Fancy having worked for four Earls of Derby."

<http://www.knowsley.gov.uk/things-to-see-and-do/galleries-and-museum.aspx>

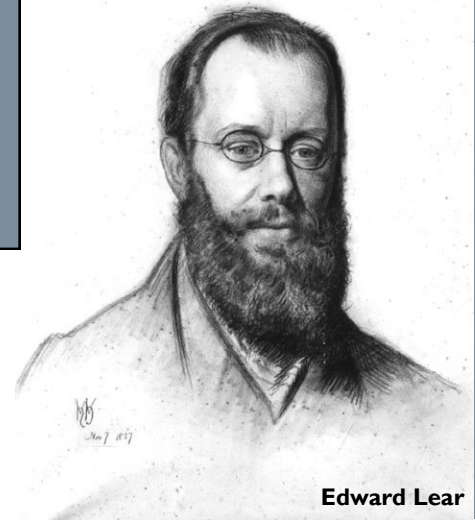


THE OWL AND THE PUSSY-CAT.



13th Earl of Derby, Lord Stanley

Edward Lear & Knowsley Hall



Edward Lear

In July 1837 Lord Stanley and his nephew, Robert Hornby, jointly paid for Lear to go to Italy to recover his health.

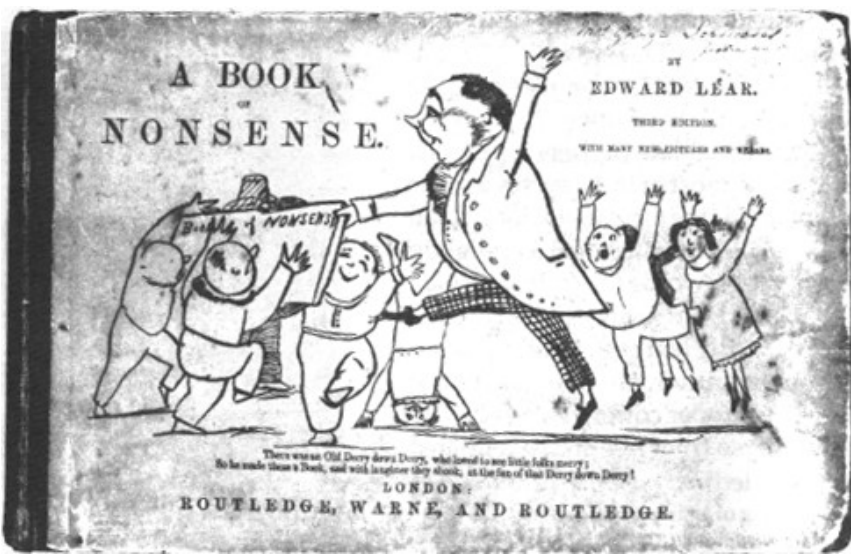
During his time living and working at Knowsley Hall, Lear became a firm favourite of the family, and entertained Lord Derby's children and grandchildren with rhymes, jokes and sketches on his frequent visits. During formal evening meals, Lear would entertain the children and adults with curious characters, limericks or singing his songs of nonsense at the piano.

It was in the Nursery at Knowsley Hall that Lear's famous *Nonsense Rhymes* were written and illustrated for the grandchildren of the 13th Earl and their cousins, the most well known being *The Owl and the Pussycat*. "*Nonsense is the breath of my nostrils*" wrote Lear. He also noted that during his time at Knowsley there was, "*nothing I long for half so much as to giggle heartily and to hop on one leg down the great gallery – but I dare not!*" Presumably not everyone in the household was amused!

Amongst the illustrations and sketches that Lear produced for his rhymes, was a cat who made many appearances, this was his beloved cat called Foss.

Lear's nonsense poems are distinguished by his creative use of verbal invention, and in the sounds of words, both real and imaginary. His heroes are *Quangle-Wangles*, *Pobbles*, and *Jumblies*! He saw writing nonsense lyrics as the perfect medium for commenting on the world around him, or as he put it "*This ludicrously whirligig life which one suffers from first and laughs at afterwards.*"

After leaving Knowsley Hall, Lear spent much of the rest of his life travelling extensively across the world, including India, Israel, Egypt, Italy, Greece and Switzerland. During his travels he painted many landscapes of the places he visited.



There was an Old Man with a beard,
Who said, "It is just as I feared! —
Two Owls and a Hen, four Larks and a Wren,
Have all built their nests in my beard."