

Ambrose Bierce, (1842-1913?) soldier, man of letters, cynic, misogynist and misanthrope, reigned over the San Francisco literary scene during the latter half of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century. In his

newspaper columns he lambasted politicians, clerics and bad writers - in fact, all forms of hypocrisy, corruption and pretension. His venomous wit and razor-sharp tongue are evident in his **Devil's Dictionary**, probably his best-remembered

descent. He was the tenth of the thirteen children, each of whom had a name beginning with the letter A. The roots of his later misogyny are thought to lie in the lack of attention of a mother too preoccupied to give any of her children the love they craved. This was later compounded by the disillusionment of an unhappy marriage. Lonely and rejected, the young Ambrose turned to books, which were to become a lifelong consolation.

In 1861, at the age of 19, he enlisted in Lincoln's army, and fought in the Civil War, where his extreme bravery singled him out for notice early on. It has been pointed out that in the Crimean War, 20 000 British soldiers were killed, only 3 000 in direct combat. In the Civil War's Battle of Shiloh alone, there were 23 741 casualties, and in the Battle of Chickamauga in 1863, 16 000 were killed. Bierce was present at both these battles. The horrors and atrocities of this war left an indelible mark on him.

After the war, he resigned from the army when he did not receive the expected promotion to the rank of captain. He found himself in a booming, post Gold Rush San Francisco, where his writing career was launched and where he was to remain for thirty



BETWEEN
THE LINES

Cecily van Gend

work, which has become something of an American classic. An abridged version of this has recently been published by Bloomsbury, illustrated by the inimitable Ralph Steadman.

Bierce was born in Meigs County, Ohio, to parents of Quaker

years, except for short stints in London and Washington. He tried his hand at poetry, believing it to be the highest form of literature, but recognised early on that he would never be as good a poet as he would like, although he continued to write verse, much of it satirical. He began publishing articles in various periodicals, and eventually in 1868 he joined the **New Letter** as an editor and columnist, increasing its circulation dramatically with a series of attacks on the clergy.

His big break came in 1887, when he was invited by William Randolph Hearst to write a column and editorials for his San Francisco **Examiner**. Hearst saw that the future of newspapers lay in the sensationalist 'yellow' press, which he hoped would become the vehicle for a successful presidential campaign. He therefore did not mind that Bierce's controversial opinions were often at odds with his own, as long as they sold his newspaper. Bierce saw the **Examiner** not only as an outlet for his outrageous opinions, but also for his shockingly powerful Civil War stories, where he was able at last to transform his horrific memories into literature.

In 1896 Hearst sent Bierce to Washington, to campaign against the railroad baron Collis P Huntington. (See my previous **CL** article, January/February 2000, pp.42-43 on the Huntington Library in Pasadena.) Huntington, whose nephew was to marry his (Collis's) widow and endow the magnificent Huntington Library to the people of Pasadena, had been granted a loan for his Southern Pacific railroad by the Lincoln administration. No interest had been paid, and now he had sponsored a bill in Congress for a 75-year postponement of the debt. Bierce's attack on Huntington and his bill in the **Examiner** had so devastating an effect that Huntington, meeting him on the steps of the Capitol, asked him to name his price. Bierce's reply reverberated in newspaper headlines across the country: 'My price is seventy-five million dollars. If, when you are ready to pay, I happen to be out of town, you may hand it over to my friend, the Treasurer of the United States.' Huntington's bill failed.

Besides his controversial opinion pieces and Civil War stories, Bierce began producing his **Devil's Dictionary** in instalments in the **Examiner**. These were finally gathered together and published in their complete form in the twelve volumes of his **Collected Works** in 1911. It is in these epigrammatic definitions that he loosed his cynicism, sharp tongue, and acerbic wit on the topics which most raised his ire.

His general misanthropy is apparent, for example, in such entries as Idiot: 'A member of a large and powerful tribe whose influence in human affairs has always been dominant and controlling. The Idiot's activity is not confined to any special field of thought and action, but "pervades and regulates the whole." He has the last word in everything, his decision is unappealable. He sets the fashions of opinion and taste, dictates the limitation of speech and circumscribes conduct with a dead-line', and Fool: 'A person who pervades the domain of intellectual speculation and diffuses himself through the channel of moral activity.'

Almost entirely self-educated, he had read his way through Gibbons's **The history of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire**, and was also profoundly influenced by Swift and Voltaire. He saw Education as 'That which discloses to the wise and disguises from the foolish their lack of understanding', while Learning was 'The kind of ignorance distinguishing the studious.'

His satire is directed at himself as much as others. An Ignoramus is defined as 'A person unacquainted with certain kinds of knowledge familiar to yourself, and having certain other kinds that you

know nothing about', while a Bore is 'One who talks when you wish him to listen' and a Bigot is 'One who is obstinately and zealously attached to an opinion that you do not entertain.' A Conversation is 'A fair for the display of the minor mental commodities, each exhibitor being too intent upon the arrangement of his own wares to observe those of his neighbor.'

There are several entries relating to the clergy. He defines Religion as 'The daughter of Hope and Fear, explaining to Ignorance the nature of the Unknowable.' A Christian is 'One who believes that the New Testament is a divinely inspired book admirably suited to the spiritual needs of his neighbor. One who follows the teaching of Christ in so far as they are not inconsistent with a life of sin.' A Saint is 'A dead sinner revised and edited', while an Infidel is 'In New York, one who does not believe in the Christian religion; in Constantinople, one who does.'

His attitude to marriage and to females in general would probably be regarded with indignation by today's feminists as being chauvinist in the extreme. This attitude, as has been pointed out, probably had its roots in the perceived indifference of his mother, too preoccupied with grieving for those of her numerous offspring who did not survive past infancy, and caring for those remaining. This was compounded by an unhappy marriage. He saw a Female as 'One of the opposing, or unfair sex.' He describes Belladonna as 'In Italian a beautiful lady; in English as deadly poison. A striking example of the essential identity of the two tongues.' Bait is 'A preparation that renders the hook more palatable. The best kind is beauty' while Beauty is 'The power by which a woman charms a lover and terrifies a husband.' A Bride is 'A woman with a fine prospect of happiness behind her.'

As one would expect, he has a lot to say about language and literature. A dictionary is 'A malevolent literary device for cramping the growth of a language and making it hard and inelastic. This dictionary [referring to his own] however, is a most useful work.' A lexicographer is 'A pestilent fellow who, under the pretense of recording some particular stage in the development of a language, does what he can to arrest its growth, stiffen its flexibility and mechanize its methods. For your lexicographer, having written his dictionary, comes to be considered as one having authority, whereas his function is only to make a record, not to give a law.'

Bierce died in mysterious circumstances. The date of his death is always preceded by a question mark. In 1913 he expressed his intention of travelling to Mexico to observe the progress of the Revolution. He was last seen in Texas in October of that year, and in December his secretary/companion Carrie Christianson received a letter, purportedly from Chihuahua. After that he simply disappeared without trace, despite the attempts by the US government to track him down. Did he join Pancho Villa's rebels? Was he killed as a bystander in the crossfire? Is there anything in the rumour that the Mexican expedition was a blind for his own suicide, and that he headed for the Grand Canyon, found a remote spot, and shot himself? We will probably never know. What we do have, however, is his dictionary, where he has found a kind of Immortality, which he defines as:

'A toy which people cry for,
And on their knees apply for,
Dispute, contend and lie for, and if allowed
Would be right proud
Eternally to die for.'