

Following in The Highwayman's Footsteps

I'm losing grip on reality. This morning, beginning a ten-hour journey, my laptop died, abandoning me. Now, on the Isle of Wight, there's no phone signal. And I'm 450 miles from home, listening to Alfred Noyes reading *The Highwayman*.

Seriously. I'm in Alfred Noyes' house, listening to an old recording of him reading that iconic, mesmerising poem.

It's late, but I can't sleep. I want to see the moon. 'Watch for me by moonlight. I'll come to thee by moonlight ...' But it's cloudy. Besides, I don't know where it would be, whether it's new or full, waxing or waning.

I'm here because when humans see footsteps, we have to follow. I'm here because of my new book, *The Highwayman's Footsteps*, and a central character, Bess, who followed in her father's footsteps. Bess is the passionate, independent, furious daughter of Noyes' highwayman and his lover, also Bess – the landlord's red-lipped, black-eyed daughter.

Noyes' poem suffuses my story so deeply that I needed permission to use it. His daughter, Lady Nolan, read my book and generously agreed. 'You should visit our old house,' she said,

'though I'm afraid the Isle of Wight is a long way from Edinburgh.' No matter, I thought – think how much work I can do on my laptop...

Lady Nolan continued. 'And while you're there, you can listen to the recording' – recording? – 'of my father reading *The Highwayman*.' I don't know if she caught my intake of breath but somehow I managed to continue our conversation, a very wonderful conversation



with a daughter who spoke of her father with enormous affection.

'He had a great love of life. I remember at meal-times, with guests, gales of laughter from his end of the table.' She told of his puzzlement at the extraordinary fame of this early poem, written not long after leaving Oxford – he left to find a publisher instead of sitting his finals. She told me many details, including one unnecessary one: 'He had a wonderful reading voice.'

I know. It makes me shiver.

I follow the printed words as I listen, the room half-dark. It's the version with Charles Keeping's award-winning illustrations.

When I first saw them, I didn't warm to them. I wanted colour, red for Bess's lips and the dark-red love-knot; I wanted claret velvet and brown doe-skin, jewelled sky, the purple moor, the wine-red coat. Above all, I wanted scarlet for passion, anger and death.

Now I'm reading it again, through eyes that are not entirely dry, with the reedy, moonlit pictures blurring and the passion held in the music of the words, and in the poet's own voice, measured, throaty, warm.

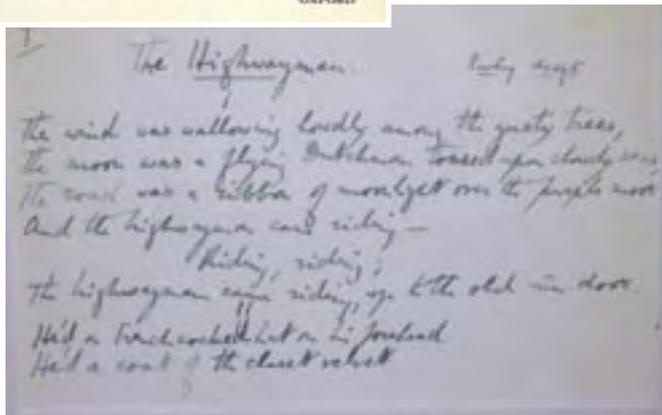
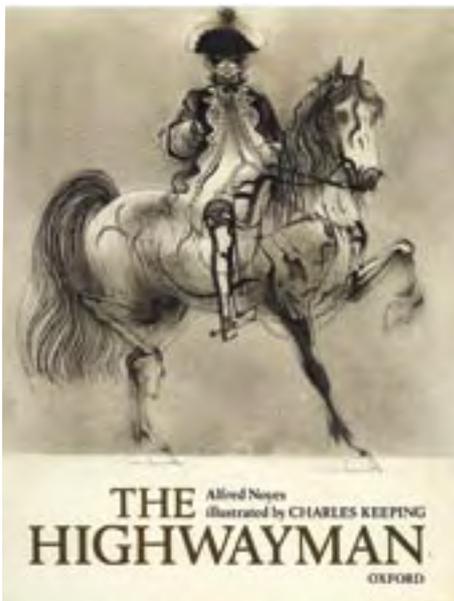
I will leave with something more tangible than memories: I have a copy of an early draft, in Noyes' own hand, complete with crossings out, given me by his grandson earlier this evening, as the shadows drifted over the lawns to the sea.

The tape has ended, its crackles fading. I must look out of the window. And believe me – for it's true – the moon is there, and it is a 'ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas'. It looks entirely full to me.

Truth mixes with fiction and the mysterious thing is that out of it comes a greater truth. This has been a story of connections, of footsteps, of letting go of reality and yet somehow finding something more real.

It was worth the death of my laptop.

Nicola Morgan



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