

This article by George Melly was published in the Observer Colour Supplement on 6th October 1968.



¶ There was little excuse for the invention of the name MUSRUM. It was already known in sixteen principalities and native states.

¶ There were, however, several religious reasons, but these are unlikely to become evident in what follows.

¶ Musrum is terribly afraid of sponge-cats.

¶ Keep your sponge-cat under control ...

¶ The Kingdom of Intersols lopes down for a hundred miles through blue flax plantations to the sea and oblivion.

¶ The Trans-Siberian Railway was established to facilitate the construction of the Far East.

¶ Every hour, on the precise stroke, trains leave Moscow bearing Musrum and his relations in tears.

¶ Gilvis wrote a Book of Life for the dead.

¶ He is probably writing your biography at this moment.

¶ A sponge-cat weeps after the Muscovite trains. Musrum also weeps, but in another room.

¶ Sudden prayers make God jump.

¶ The forehead of the Arch-Scraph slopes down for a hundred miles to the sea and oblivion.

¶ Mandrills and bishops have purple in common.

¶ The fear of sponge-cats is the beginning of wisdom.

¶ A torpedoed cathedral sinks rapidly into the earth.

¶ The third miracle introduced red and green into the world.

¶ The fourth miracle made God duck.

¶ Needing time, Musrum accepted the offer of the year 1489 from an itinerant pedlar. This gave him the opportunity to construct the North American Continent.

¶ Whilst engaged on this monumental work, he was glimpsed by the Portuguese cartographer Ireneo Alvarez who sketched a tentative map of him. Large unexplored areas were left blank.

¶ Maps of Musrum's handiwork were already circulating clandestinely in Spain early in 1491. They were remarkably accurate except that the unknown cartographer insisted on colouring all the dragons blue.

This 20-point manifesto introduces, in a book out this month, the fantastic world of Musrum. Already it looks like becoming a cult. The Musrum Chronicles are the creation of Anthony Earnshaw and the Rev. Eric Thacker. Their story of a criminal demi-god who tries to recreate this world in the next could be the surreal bestseller of the decade. George Melly unearths the musroid beginnings in a mushroom shed.



Musrum is a 'criminal' demi-god who flees from this world. He constructs a makeshift replica of this place, the musroid world. . . . Even at the end, after his apotheosis, he remains imperturbably ridiculous.

Anthony Earnshaw, in a letter to George Melly.

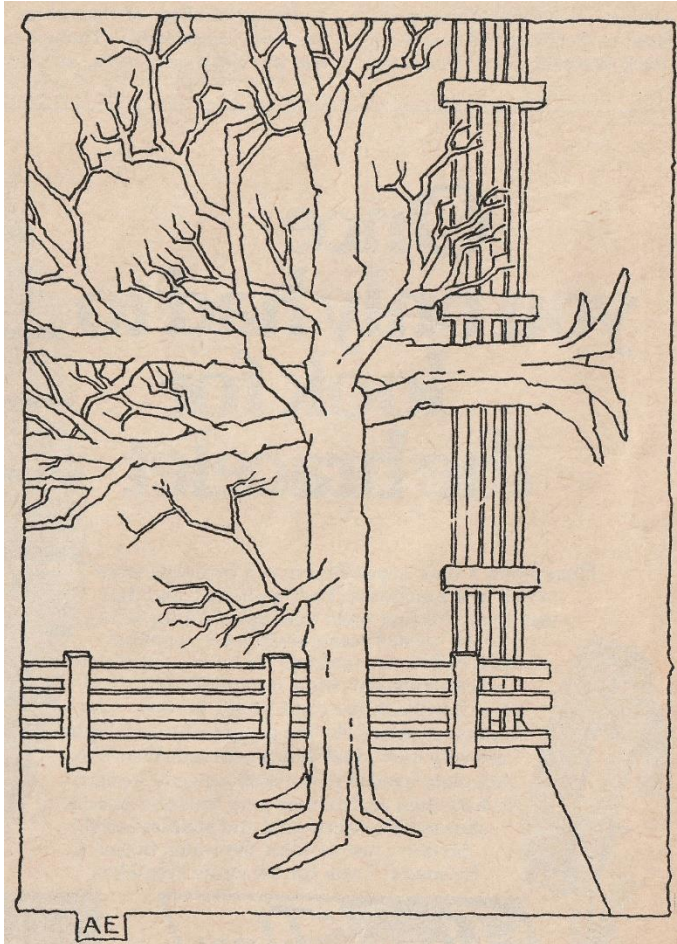
Northbrook Street, Leeds 7, is short, steeply-raked, and cobbled. The two-up, two-down late-nineteenth-century terrace houses are roofed in crude purple tiles and built from that raw red brick which always comes as a shock to eyes accustomed to the discreet yellowish grey of their London equivalent. In Number 64 lives Anthony Earnshaw: ex-factory worker, art-school teacher, painter and writer.

Thirty-five miles away in Rawmarsh, on the outskirts of Rotherham, in a weed-choked garden behind a large soot-black Methodist chapel, is Wesley Manse, a solid, many-roomed house with a fine view of the moors, home of the Rev. Eric Thacker, former machine engraver, jazz critic and poet.

These two men are the co-authors and illustrators of 'Musrum', a shared fantasy which developed out of their long letters and occasional meetings, and which Jonathan Cape publishes this month (30s.). I find it a beautiful, extraordinary and funny book, but what I hope to do here is, not to criticise it, but to establish how and why it came to be written. For although 'Musrum' is a very personal statement it is also part of a comparatively recent yet well-established tradition, a fruit of that provincial 'underground' which seeded in the late 1930s and early 1940s, drawing its growth from a number of factors among which revivalist jazz and Surrealism are perhaps the most important.

Its history has yet to be written, which is not to say that its recent developments are unrecorded. In particular, there was a well-documented article by Peter Fryer in *Encounter* (October 1967), but the mistake here and elsewhere has been to confuse the recognition of a movement with its origins; to date its birth from the historic occasion in July 1965 when the Poets' Co-operative filled the Albert Hall with more than 6,000 enthusiasts of British and American beat poetry, and to allow phrases like 'as early as 1959' to confuse the picture. In my view the famous Albert Hall evening was more an end than a beginning; the equivalent of a private company 'going public'.

Edward Lucie-Smith's introduction to his anthology 'The Liverpool Scene' (Donald Carroll) showed a better sense of historical perspective, but his conclusions seem to me too localised. Liverpudlians are nature's PR men, and Lucie-Smith is not alone in accepting their chauvinistic interpretation. Certainly, Liverpool has played an important part in the development of the provincial Underground, and was responsible for 'selling' it to a wider public, but, considerable talent aside, the movement already had a lot going for it.



A Corner of Earnshaw's world – 'every possible and every impossible thing'

There was a disarming honesty in the way the poets in the 'Liverpool Scene' dedicated their work to 'The Beatles without whom . . .' On the other hand, their bias in favour of 'happenings' and public readings has had the effect of swinging the emphasis towards instant communication and, as a result, certain less pop, more hermetic work has passed unnoticed. 'The Ship's Orchestra', a remarkable book by Roy Fisher, a Birmingham jazz pianist, is one example (Fulcrum Press, 26 Fitzroy Square, London W1), and there is no doubt that it is high time to redress the balance.

'Musrum' should help, but there is some danger that Cape's formidable talent for publicity may tempt it to play up to the picturesque circumstance of the book's authors. The publishers

wouldn't have it all their own way, though. While the photographs of this article were being taken Earnshaw's wife watched from the open door.

'Just look at them!' she said. 'The vanity of some people!'

Thacker protested mildly: 'It's after years of obscurity, Monica.'

'Years of preparation, Eric,' she said.

Monica Earnshaw is a witty deflater, strong in defence of what she feels to be central, contemptuous of what she suspects to be trivial or spurious.

Besides, Earnshaw and Thacker are not young extroverts, not in any way 'pop'. They are both in their forties, essentially rather private people, but at the same time they embody many of those elements which came together to release the imagination of an educationally deprived class. 'Musrum' is the Odyssey of a selfmade culture: witty, erudite, poetic. During the past 30 years I have met many people of the same background who have shared all or most of their obsessions. Where they are unique is in having constructed out of their obsessions a work of true originality.

As the room downstairs was loud with wives, children and Radio One, I talked to Earnshaw and Thacker in Earnshaw's bedroom. They are an interesting contrast physically. Earnshaw is small, wiry, with a large head, thin wispy hair, sharp elfin features and intense eyes. Thacker is large, solid, grey-bearded, bespectacled and seems grey with overwork. Thacker gives the impression that he keeps going by will, Earnshaw by mania.

They talk easily, affectionately, but with areas of disagreement. Thacker, for example, said at one point that he was 'drawn towards Jung'. Earnshaw immediately wished to 'dissociate' himself. They differ, too, in their interpretation of the religious aspect of their book. Earnshaw, an atheist, thinks that 'God is mocked'. Thacker, understandably, holds that 'only a certain notion of God is mocked'. Despite this, my impression is that Earnshaw is more attracted by mysticism than his partner, or by ritual, at any rate.

On the other hand, neither is particularly interested in their book's 'message', and they are prepared to be amused by the several interpretations they believe possible. As 'Musrum' himself is the owner of a sacred mushroom, they think the whole thing may be taken to be a defence of the hallucinatory experience; an idea that never occurred to them during the writing.

Earnshaw was born in Ilkley, Yorkshire, in 1924, two months after his father's death. His family came to Leeds via Redcar some nine years later. He left school at 14 and worked from then on in factories, being excused military service because of bronchitis. In the 1940s he taught himself to paint and was later encouraged by another young Yorkshire painter, Patrick Hughes. It was at Hughes's instigation that he held his first one-man show, and it was through his influence that, by Easter 1967, Earnshaw was able to 'stop association with factories' and take up teaching full-time. He has been married 11 years and has two disturbingly bright little girls.

Thacker is a year older. His father was a posterwriter, interested in art to the extent of 'copying pictures in Leeds art Gallery'. Thacker, too, left school at 14. He worked for two years in the display department of a big store before becoming a machine engraver. He was in the army from 1944 to 1947, decided to become a clergyman in 1951 and was ordained in 1957. He is married with four children, one of whom, Andrea, played a part in the invention of Musrum. Some time during May

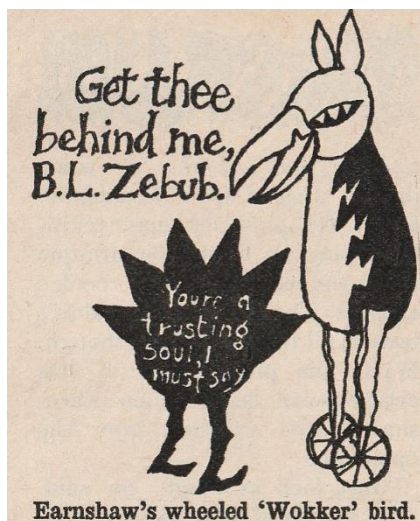
1966 she chalked the word 'Musrum' on the door of an outhouse in which her father was trying unsuccessfully to grow mushrooms.

Until quite recently the relationship between the two men has been spasmodic, apparently controlled by that 'certainty of hazard' to which the Surrealists attached so much value.

They first met in 1942 at Leeds Rhythm Club and discovered their common interests not only in jazz but also in other 'recondite' subjects. When Thacker went into the army and was posted to South East Asia, they maintained contact by an eager exchange of letters, and after his demobilisation and return to Leeds they saw a great deal of each other. This was their period of occasional 'games' in the Surrealist sense. They would arrange to meet, for example, in a darkened cinema and, having established contact, would leave immediately together and go for a walk.

Thacker left Leeds in 1952 to Prepare himself for the ministry and they lost touch, but met again by chance on a tram in 1953. Following this, a half-hearted correspondence was maintained.

After Thacker's ordination and an Indian ministry, they again lost contact but, hearing of his appointment to the living in Rawmarsh in 1965, Earnshaw wrote to ask him to open his first exhibition in the gallery of Leeds School of Art. From then on frequent letters were exchanged and, from their invention of a comic strip about a wheeled bird called 'Wokker', the concept of Musrum gradually evolved.



The Wokker strip is already post-Andrea, in that its full title is 'Musrum's Wokker'. It is satirical in the general sense, but full of esoteric references to their mutual obsessions. Among these I have already singled out jazz and Surrealism. Revivalist jazz was to become a widespread passion, although both writers were extremely early in their appreciation. In a letter to me, Earnshaw expressed precisely the attraction which early jazz held out to so many of us young Englishmen during the 1940s and early 1950s.

. . . jazz represented a marvellous far-away place . . .
. New Orleans ... a kind of wonderland where marvellous people did marvellous things. . . Surrealism, too.

Here we are in less well-charted waters, and of course far fewer people were involved, too. Even so the *secret* effect of Surrealism has been considerable. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, at the very time when the intellectual *avant-garde* establishment was vigorously rejecting the movement as dead, as old hat, Surrealism was working like yeast in the most diverse places. It lay behind much of the Goons'

approach to humour, and inspired a number of other groups, such as 'The Alberts', and the work of 'Professor' Bruce Lacey. Yet especially it took refuge in the imaginations of obscure young people, offering in exchange a charter for their own feelings in a world which denied that right.

Here is Earnshaw again:

My discovery of Surrealism was a love encounter. I felt I'd been wandering all my life and of a sudden arrived at some place where I was no longer alone. . . .

What was strange though was the way Surrealism sought out its potential adherents. At that time almost the only book available was the Herbert Read anthology (Faber and Faber, 1938), and that was becoming hard to find. Yet, independently, Thacker and Earnshaw (and, come to that, myself), all came across it and felt we had 'arrived at some place where we were no longer alone'.

Earnshaw still loves Surrealism, he turned up at the 'Surrealist Festival' organised by John Lyle, a bookseller, in Exeter last year, but Thacker is less convinced. He was always suspicious of its Marxist-Freudian allegiance, although equally affected by its passion for the marvellous.

Also involved was Surrealism's respect for the poetic without reference to 'respectability' of context. Among the enthusiasms which the two jazz fans found they shared in common were such then-despised artifacts as 'King Kong' and other films of that tendency, science fiction, Bram Stoker's 'Dracula', and American comic books. Later these were to form part of the hagiography of 'pop' culture, but neither Thacker nor Earnshaw approached them in the defensively cool pop spirit. They were after an alternative universe.

I asked Earnshaw if he had been aware at the time of his discovery of Surrealism in the 1940s that there was a group in London. He said he had been, but had felt unable to contact it.

. . . I saw myself as a scruffy working lad, no money, uneducated, no talent. I'd only just to teach myself to draw and paint (from rock bottom). Nothing to offer but my restlessness. The idea of a real surrealist like Mesens overawed me. I didn't want to be told to 'piss off'.

His reticence, and that of many like him, was a pity. Surrealism was then a sinking pirate ship, the 'rats' swam away to carve Madonnas for Anglican churches or towards their knighthoods. It is only recently that there have been signs that it may be salvaged, re-floated and remanned, and now, of course, it suffers under the disability of 'historical' respectability.

But in private Earnshaw persisted and now he and Thacker have in my view succeeded in creating that world they dreamt of. Earnshaw again:



The book may well be a fantasy. If it is, it's not one that offers an escape from the world. For Eric, as for me, reality has always contained every possible and every impossible thing.

This is an encouraging declaration of faith. At a time when 'pop' appears to be chasing its own psychedelic tail in gestures of increasingly desperate triviality, two men are prepared to reassert their faith in the marvellous.