

Early Years.

Ezra Pound was born in 1885 in Idaho in the American West. His ancestors were a mixed bunch, on one side horse-thieves and on the other businessmen. Ezra's middle name was Loomis and the Loomis Gang were notorious from the early 1800's on. In 1868 they were described as a family that "had grown rich through thieving. Now they dress genteely, educate their children at the best schools, appear tolerably well in society and have manners that are quite polished. Their operations are carried out in several counties". The more respectable side of the family included a Lieutenant Governor of the state of Wisconsin. Ezra's grandfather was President of a Timber Company and his father ran a government land office where miners could have their claims filed and their ore assayed. A great-uncle was the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow who wrote the famous long poem "Hiawatha". Hiawatha, son of the beautiful Wenonah and the West Wind, marries the Indian maiden, Minnehaha ('laughing water'). Ezra, whose poetic role in life was to be a great moderniser, was always reluctant to discuss this family connection.

He took a degree in Literature-related subjects at Hamilton college achieving Distinctions in Anglo-Saxon, Orations, Parliamentary Law, and Advanced French. Then he went on to take a Master's at the University of Pennsylvania where he enrolled in the Department of Romance taking many of the courses they offered which included old French, old Italian, Provencal, special work in Latin and old Spanish literature. Later, he also enrolled for Sicilian poetry, Chaucer and contemporary poetry.

However he scarcely turned up for anything and, worse still, managed to quarrel with a key member of the Department. So eventually he left and applied for a post at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, a small town in Western Indiana. The job was advertised very grandly as "Chairman of the Department of Romance Languages", but there was no such Department. The President of Wabash had merely decided to divide the modern languages teaching into two sections, Germanic and Romance, thinking he would get a better class of applicant if he described it in this fashion. Ezra got the job. Academically the college was negligible. Its only distinction was its Little Titans football team, which had once beaten Harvard.

The students were unsure what to make of Ezra - they thought he was a screwball and a dreamer - and even complained to the President about his language and the number of cigars he consumed. He spent most of his spare time by himself reading voraciously. His passion was to learn and practice all that was known about the craft of poetry and he studied, for himself, the greatest masters: Homer, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Browning, moving on to minor poets who had advanced the art such as Sappho, Ovid, Catullus, Propertius and the Provencal Poets. He acquired a typewriter and began writing poetry in the manner of Robert Browning. He tried to write an original sonnet a day. And he began courting a young woman in whom the President of the College himself was interested. This proved inadvisable. And it was not long before he was obliged to leave. The end came on a bitterly cold night.

After reading late he walked downtown through a blizzard to mail a letter. On the Street he met a girl from a stranded Burlesque show, penniless and suffering from the cold. He took her to his rooms. She spent the night in his bed, while he slept on the floor of his study. He went off to class in the morning. The ladies from whom he rented the rooms went upstairs to make the bed and found in it the girl. The President and the Trustees of the college had other reasons besides the actress for wishing to see the back of him. His repeated absences from chapel, his constant smoking, even a rumour that he put rum in his tea, all added up to the conclusion that he was "the Latin Quarter type" and not Wabash material at all. However, he received part of his salary up to the end of the academic year. He had long been thinking about going to Europe and there seemed little to hold him in America for the time being. With a little money from a helpful Aunt he sailed off to the Olde Worlde.

After a brief sojourn in Venice, where he unsuccessfully tried to become a gondolier, he decided to make for London. He later said that W.B.Yeats had been the magnet that drew him to London, because in those days, he said, "Yeats knew more about poetry than anybody else". So, in August 1908 Ezra Pound arrived in London apparently with £3 in his pocket, Wabash College having failed to send him the balance of what he was owed.