

itself by Post, so soon as you have all quite done with it in Grafton Street; it can even be returned by the same conveyance, if needful.

In spite of the frost, my Wife continues in motion; doing out her season &c; — in hourly expectation too of a little Dog! We hope to see you again some evening soon, when you dare venture out so far. Evening or morning such an *Erscheinung* is well worthy of welcome, depend upon it! —

Yours very sincerely

T. Carlyle

David Southern



“His humanity and cordiality as a tutor”: Remembering C. S. Lewis

The following memoir of his Oxford tutor C. S. Lewis (1898–1963; ODNB) was written by the late Professor Kenneth J. Fielding on 11 December 1989, at the request of a friend. The editors are grateful to Mary Fielding, KJF’s sister, for her kind encouragement and permission to publish this document.

I do sometimes think that I would like to write a little about [C. S. Lewis], just as I knew him; but the essential thing is to have someone cast in the role of the interested listener, for which perhaps you should do? The greatest obstacle, apart from not doing justice to even the slight relationship of being a pupil for a short while, is that I find when I settle myself to remembering the past is that I keep coming in the way of the subject. I suppose we have been told about this, when thinking about autobiography or reminiscences. It is fine when the subject is one’s own memories; but it won’t do when trying to meet the demand of giving a clear, and even “loving” picture—as TC would say. It is not that I did not feeling something of what he really was, and can confirm that the impression one has of him from his books is the same as that of the man

himself—occasionally questioned or denied. It is that the impression was made in the soft, rather putty-coloured mind of myself at age 18. Or, if I do myself an injustice, which isn't likely—the dimness is rather in me now. I am conscious of having failed to do him justice in conversation, when the question has come up of what he was like. There is another difficulty: almost of the opposite kind. He was a benevolent tutor to me, rather than a strict one. I have never told anyone that he said of my first essay that I wrote for him that it was the best (one of the best?) that he had had, as a first essay. Even then I knew that there was something wrong with that! But there were two reasons for his saying it. One was that I had been so badly or negatively taught English that I had to think for myself—whatever the thoughts were that I came to. The other that he was someone who lived so much in the world of literature and the imagination, and recognised that in my own way (a different one) I was almost totally absorbed in “English literature.” I was keenly interested in the subject and him; and no-one has so many students of the kind, though there were no doubt many others, that this is not welcomed. But of course, I can't say this about him to just anyone. It is a not a matter of modesty, but of incredibility! If not of incredibility, of how wide he was of the mark. But he was careful enough to limit himself to “first essay.”

There have been plenty of descriptions of him as a tutor. The same system of essay reading; of his sitting opposite, with a bit of paper and pencil to take a note tho' this was hardly needed. Precise comment on one's for example mistakes in writing; most of which I still remember and follow. One was not to say “react to” for respond to, for a response which was not simply a reaction. Nor to use the word “worthwhile,” or not to use it as a critical term! And there are others that will come back to me. Of course, in Jan. 1943, this was at a time when we had the luxury of one-to-one tutorials, which suited me.¹

I am trying to write this without hesitation, directly as it comes to me. And, even so, it is going to take too long, just at the moment. Too long for me, and very probably too long for

¹ No other tuition except lectures at choice, or not, and shared old English tutorials—or did we have those then?—I think not [KJF's note].

you. In fact, even if I don't aim (as I don't) to make this more than a hasty account in a letter, I ought to group some of my thoughts together rather than scatter them all over the place.

Yet that will slow me down so that the effort of starting to write will be too much for inertia. Let us treat this just as if it were jottings or notes—which is all that they will be.

Of course I remember the excitement of attending tutorials: the approach through the grey cloisters at Magdalen (where I had successfully visited when I had entered for a scholarship in Modern Subjects late in 1942); the tunnel or corridor through to the “New Buildings” at the back; and the staircase to the first floor, where we waited to enter on the hour as the clock struck the correct time from the tower, and which we left by his clock which was kept five minutes fast. On the first meeting he put me at my ease by asking me where my rooms were in Univ. (Radcliffe Quad, staircase 12, firstfloor left), and saying that they were the same that he had had. Seemed significant to me then!

You will say (or I will say it for you) that these remarks of mine are less than trivial; but, naturally, our relationship was tutor and pupil or student; his to teach, mine to learn; his to encourage, mine to respond. After coming back to war service, I did not return to him as a tutor, but was lucky once again in that we were “farmed out” from Univ. to Hugo Dyson [1896–1975], at Merton, another Lewisian connection. One either had the sense then (or it has built up since) that there was a deeper relationship, very largely I suppose because of his books. At the time I had read the preface to *Paradise Lost* [1942] (as a part of scholarship preparation; and again, something we had to discover for ourselves rather than be taught). During 1943, I certainly read *Perelandra* [1943] (bought it as a present for my mother; read *Out of the Silent Planet* [1938] in the Old Bodleian; read the *Pilgrim's Regress* [1933], but did not take to it. No doubt read the *Screwtape Letters* [1942]; and it was probably only later that I read *Christian Behaviour* [1943], the *Problem of Pain* [1940], etc. etc. and I think obtained them while I was in the army. As were then reading only Milton in one term and Shakespeare in another I am sure that I did not read the *Allegory of Love* [1936].

I regret now that I did not attend the Aquinas Society, to listen to his part in his meetings. I was totally uninterested

in, or incapable of interest in, philosophy; largely agnostic, but entirely able to respond to the romanticism of the fiction, or reason and commonsense of the broadcast talks; with a muddled but not unresponsive mind, with a lot merely strewn around in it. So all I can note is the thoughts of a first-year eighteen-year old.

He must have been lecturing then, but I don't remember any of his lectures until 1946, when they were energetically recommended to us by Dyson, who was disappointed when we said that we did not find them very stimulating. They were the series that turned into the Prolegomena to the Renaissance. If he had ever been an inspirational lecturer, he had turned against this, and perhaps explained that they were meant to give an introduction to the structure of thought and beliefs at the time. He had a large audience, now; gave them with emphasis and clarity; I made careful detailed notes, as I did of few lectures; but thought them beneficial rather than "interesting."

I doubt if, in the tutorials themselves, he ever took advantage of Christian apology; they were about the works, and decidedly about what the works were about. Does he say this in the preference to P. L.; if not, he said so at the time. This was also the time of the British Academy lecture, *Hamlet the Prince or the Poem* [1942]? Which gives a good idea of his style, I would say. I was interested enough in this to disagree with it, and write a note arguing the case against it on the inside back cover of my copy, which I still have. That is to say, he argues (sensibly enough) that because *Macbeth*, *Othello*, etc. express themselves in great poetry it does not mean that this itself affects their character. But my reply (longer and more reasonable) was that the fact they had to express themselves in this way by the nature of the kind of work the tragedies were, meant that their conception was invariably affected by the fact that their characters would have to be consistent with this. Dull stuff, this, for anyone else to read.

But he was prepared to talk to his students as interested and intelligent beings. More than this, the fact that he and his friends and his contemporaries had passed from school or university to active service at the end of the 1914–18 war, meant that they consciously attempted a greater friendship (I am sure) than they might have felt called on to show at another time. The particular

group of us who benefited from this, did not do all that much to deserve it later probably. But at the end of the summer term, he gave us a small dinner-party in his rooms at Magdalen; a good dinner, amusing conversation; reading from that eccentric Irish female novelist (.....?); assurances that the Dean would not mind our returning late—which he did. I have often late been ashamed that I've never been (nor has hardly anyone else that I can think of) as generous to my students as he, and later Dyson, were. Of course he was not intimidating: I borrowed Tillyard's Elizabethan World Picture [1943] from him, after it had come out, and was lying on a chair in his room—and that, too had always led me to be willing to lend students books which they may have wanted. I asked silly questions, like how many copies Perelandra had sold: question, turned aside as of no special interest. For some reason, probably at the start of term, when we came together to fix up tutorials, he discussed with amusement the many letters he received from oddities or people with problems who asked him question[s], like a woman who had written to ask him if she should enter a convent. Of course, someone said that the answer should be, "Get thee to a nunnery!"

None of this is of much interest in itself, is it? Except that it emphasises his humanity and cordiality as a tutor, in very sharp distinction no doubt with some (though by no means all) Oxford tutors: those who looked away out of the window; did not turn up; simply went through the routine. When Dyson tried to arrange an extra tutorial for us with Tolkien, after the war, we had one small seminar gathering, then he diplomatically fell ill, had a breakdown, and never saw us again. It can't have been very interesting for him; but it fits in with the account in his biography at the time.

I think it was in the time that I should have written an essay on Milton's prose that I managed to amuse him with a parody of Milton's pamphleteering style, addressing Mr Thomas Eliot. I think he remembered that, and mentioned it to Dyson. You see, again, what one can remember in what most concerns oneself, and that isn't simply because of self-absorption, but in the nature of the thing. There are one or two other details that I will leave out, because they can carry this even further.

Because of the way we were taught, there is no written comment left on one's work; and, in any case, I tore them all

up (after careful preservation) some time ago. Even so, what they might remind me of, would not be all that remarkable. He liked E. E. Stoll,² and he well might at that time; we agreed that Shylock was like Cleopatra, had his nose been longer it must have affected the way he was acted—ie. even Henry Irving could not have made him tragic with a long enough nose. The details I remember perhaps don't reflect much credit on either of us, only on the relationship in teaching, which was combined with his clear rationality, the which saw that nonsense (that looked quite like sense) did not slip by, the combination of encouragement and being able to print out faults distinctly and definitely. This kind of tutorial teaching was good for the enthusiastic student; was it wasted on the others, or did they gain from it in their own way, perhaps?

Documentary evidence? Somewhere I do have two or three postcards from him. One was in reply to a request for advice on how to go about approaching Old English on one's own, and with the recommendation to use Klaeber's *Beowulf* [1922] and the Wrenn Clark Hall translation,³ and to puzzle out. One, perhaps, just in reply to a note that I may have sent him.

I have just been able to stop and turn them out. If I xerox them, you will see that the first "How kind of you to write!" confirms what I have been saying about his own kindness. In Dec. 1943 I was under training, and perhaps had written to him after seeing a *Merchant of Venice* in the Camp Theatre.

The next is asking about Old English.

The third must have been written in the period after VE day and before going overseas again to India as it turned out. . . . I once had another one, mentioning Dover Wilson's *The Fortunes of Falstaff* [1943]: much "knocking on Open Doors."

My response to him was not merely literary, or as an 18-year old pupil. But I saw nothing of him as a more mature or postgraduate student. Yet I am the kind of muddled thinker who can be, at one and the same time basically agnostic and even half-resentful of a narrowly evangelical upbringing, and delightedly welcoming his own writing and teaching which at

² Elmer Edgar Stoll (1879–1959), American Shakespeare critic, formalist.

³ C. L. Wrenn, *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment* (1911), published by Clark Hall.

once brings thought, imagination, belief and morality alive and into combination. So that I can continue to respond to, and relapse from, such reading again and again. I think of him as the only great man I have met or known. . . .

He once recalled his horror at hearing, from a director of Macmillan's, of how proud he was of being the man who had persuaded H. G. Wells to give up writing his romantic novels and turn to serious sociological fiction. He felt that he could have run him through with a (Chestertonian) sword!

Some remarks about Disney's *Fantasia* [1940], which had been available to us eighteen months or so before, about it being delightful, but spoilt by vulgarity.

I am jotting down pure trivia; and you can see that what I remember has not anything much directly to do with what the study of Milton and Shakespeare was about—though I have also spared you some of that. I am assuming that, even these details will interest you, just because of their connection with him even though they are mixed up with me.

I also wrote to him once again when my 1959 Dickens book came out,⁴ and he replied to say that that was just the kind he wanted, nice and short. I must have kept this somewhere if it has not accidentally gone in the wreck of clear-outs and removals.

Does he say somewhere, in his writing, that meeting authors is almost always disappointing and understandably so because they are in their dilute state and not in the concentrated written form. True, but not true of him.

Kenneth J. Fielding

⁴ *Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction* (1958).