

## G. B. Tennyson A Personal Reminiscence

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**G**EORG BERNHARD TENNYSON (1930–2007) WAS CUT IN THE cloth of a Carlylean hero, a man of epical achievement, whose myriad contributions to the profession need no recounting here. But to me Georg was more. He was my hero—a man of eminence, grace, and dignity. Long ago, while a dissertation student awash in the Low Country of South Carolina, I summoned up the courage to write to Georg, who was already an academic celebrity, most notably because of his *“Sartor” Called “Resartus,”* seminal then and seminal now, still the best book ever written on Thomas Carlyle. My letter was written just before Christmas, 1967. I could go to the very street-side mailbox, if it still exists, where with trembling hands I spirited away my first letter to the immortal, the legendary G. B. Tennyson. As if in an instant, a lengthy reply came, typed carefully on UCLA stationery, encouraging me in every endeavor I had laid out and closing with the wistful regret that I was imprisoned in South Carolina, to him a territory lost to intellect since the emancipation. Georg’s light-hearted sarcasm was his moniker. He was forever kind to me, gentle really, as he pronounced on life and the profession, but he could not resist ending his letters with a zinger to remind me of my humble background. His PhD was from Princeton, mine from South Carolina, and in his mind the twain could never meet. They were forever separate, profoundly divisible.

Georg’s wit, both Renaissance and Modern, was unparalleled. Those who knew him well know exactly what I mean. Words to him were rapiers, both of parry and of offense. He, like his hero

Carlyle, was a master of logos. Victorians everywhere admired his verbal dexterity and his keen insight, but those close to him welcomed even more his tart humor and acerbic wit. Attempt a sharp exchange with him, and you were sure to be thumped, not always tactfully, on the inner temple. Georg was a man for all seasons. What he did not know could be put in a thimble. As I grew older and less wiser, I used to try, deliberately, to outwit him. Our exchanges, veritable animadversions often pages in length, contained burgeoning twit built upon burgeoning twit. Once I made the mistake of pointing out to him the contrary spellings of whisky and whiskey, musing ruefully that they were one and the same. Instead of responding with his usual encyclopedic retort, he stung me with a postcard, urging that I repair to a local liquor store (if such existed in Illinois) and purchase a fifth of Johnny Walker Black (a blend he was devoted to) and a fifth of Jack Daniels (a mash he found inferior), taste them with what capacity of discernment I could muster, and I would then discover the inviolate difference between whisky and whiskey. Georg at his best! A mere postcard was perfect for the point, or as it were the counterpoint.

Georg was the very embodiment of quixotic humor and quixotic knowledge. The dates on his letters always contained some historical irrelevance, such as “St. Margaret of Edinburgh Day.” His witty edge was forever present. He addressed his letters to me to “Abnormal, IL,” and the post office folks in Normal, IL would always deliver them, one expects with a chuckle. In my nearly forty years in academe—a profession that Georg playfully dubbed, with the intended pun, MLAdom—I never met his peer in language skills. There were myriad pretenders to be certain, but in the end it was Georg who orchestrated the orchestra. He was exceptionally notorious for inviting disparate pontificators to booze-laden, snacks-free, burst-out-into-the-hallway UCLA parties at fog-bound MLA conferences. I met more pretender-saints at those legendary enchantments via Georg’s sarcastically hearty introductions than can fruitfully be counted. Most faded immediately into their own self-congratulatory dustbins.

There was one individual, however, whom Georg introduced me to who became a mentor for life, David J. DeLaura. Georg and David were extreme opposites in style and in presence,

but both shared an important blessing—they devoted a large amount of their time to mentoring the young folks in the profession. I remember Georg's admonition to me, as if it were yesterday: "Rodger, I would like you to meet Professor David DeLaura. Pay heed! He is among our very stellar Victorians." Georg's tone was serious, almost grave, no sarcasm here. The quiet, almost shy David was somewhat taken aback by Georg's generous words. But I got the message, clearly. In return, in his gracious gentlemanly demeanor, over the din of supplicant partygoers, David asked me to write to him at the University of Texas, *at my convenience!* No one could have had better mentors: G. B. Tennyson, David J. DeLaura, and as fortune would have it, K. J. Fielding, the last of whom I have written about in the previous number of *Carlyle Studies Annual*. Carlyle had Walter Scott, Edward Irving, and Francis Jeffrey. From my perspective, I had the equal. Over the years Georg made certain to introduce me to individuals of note, not the least of whom was Ruth apRoberts, a close friend of his and soon to become a valued friend of mine. I will be forever grateful for Ruth's wise counsel. Alas, Ruth and Georg, and David and Kenneth, are now gone from us. How can it be?

Those who admired and loved Georg will never recover from his tragic death. To most academics, he was a towering figure, a daunting force to be reckoned with. But to those of us who knew him well, he was a sensitive, caring, loving person, much kinder than his Deutsch-encrusted character would ever admit. He always made certain that in conversation or in print your voice was heard. He was an exceptional man, what we expect our heroes to be. He was a latter-day piper, quite unabashedly assuming the role of leader. I particularly recall one sojourn, his leading a group of us around the village of Gemersheim, after a day of droll papers on Carlyle, until he found the "proper ratskeller." The truth is he had no clue where the hell he was going, but he led with such authority that we were all obligated to follow. Georg also possessed in plentitude a mischievous humor, reigned in only by his beloved, uniquely talented wife Elizabeth—"Madame" to him—who was his garment of protection. His letters to me often contained a wildly hilarious report on Madame's alleged antics, which of course really served as a cover for his own.

To paraphrase George Eliot on Carlyle, Georg was an oak sewing acorns. He was a hero, an Odin, almost greater than life. There never was, nor will there ever be another G. B. Tennyson. His unique, compelling character stands as his enduring legacy. We all were privileged to benefit from his life, his *Sartor Resartus*. So, GBT, I herewith bid you, in the poetically charged language of Carlyle, “fare-well.” To which I add with deepest sadness Carlyle’s hauntingly powerful close, “Adieu—.” The heroes of Valhalla have sung you home.