

T S ELIOT SOCIETY

OF THE UNITED KINGDOM



Exchanges...

Winter 2021

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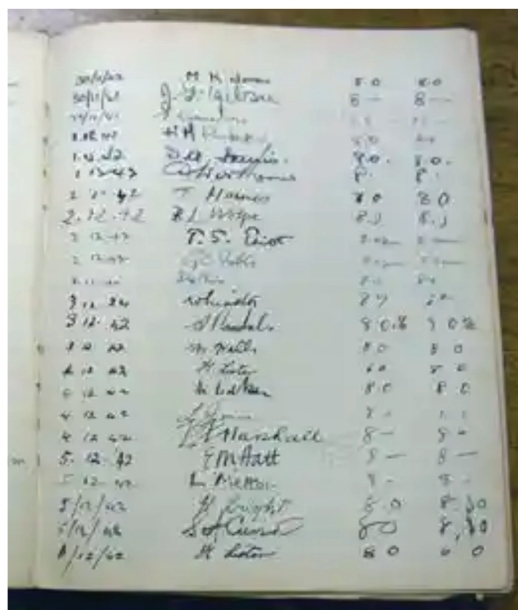
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The Faber & Faber wartime fire-watching register, showing Eliot fire-watching during the winter of 1942

Editorial

So here we are, in the very dead of winter. Not just any winter, nor even a winter of simple discontents, but a pandemic winter such as we have never seen, where the Covid-19 death toll in the UK alone has now exceeded 100,000. Earlier, naïve assumptions about Covid-19 being ‘over by Christmas’ have been put aside, as indeed were our usual seasonal celebrations. Our present naïveté may express itself in the thought that once we have all been vaccinated, everything will be fine once more, and things can get back to normal. Well; perhaps, or perhaps not.

It’s in this context of hope and uncertainty that this Winter edition of *Exchanges* is offered. Committee member Christina Percy reviews a new Sky Arts documentary on Eliot; and given the strength of her approval, readers will doubtless be encouraged to seek it out at an early opportunity. To mark the recent 850th anniversary of Archbishop Thomas Becket’s murder on the 29th December, we have an article contributed by Simon Kershaw – a founder-member of the T S Eliot Society - and originally published in 2007 on the Thinking Anglicans website which he co-curates. The article reflects on Eliot’s treatment of Church, State and the rule of Law in ‘Murder in the Cathedral’, and is footnoted by Becket’s present-day successor as Archbishop, Justin Welby.

In a seasonal reflection on Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi’, our Sussex correspondent Jay Phillips explores the poem’s particular combination of hope and uncertainty, and the contribution which it makes to the long tradition surrounding the Magi story. And to conclude, Society member Jack Glynne Jones reflects on what for him are some of the most memorable lines in ‘Four Quartets’, and considers Eliot’s verse as hopeful reassurance.

The coming of the Magi marks, of course, the start of the Epiphany season, which ends with Candlemas, known to Eliot and the Book of Common Prayer as ‘The Presentation of Christ in the Temple’, and celebrated forty days after Christmas on 2nd February. Here too, developing tradition is of interest. From the mid-fourth century, apparently, this feast was kept at Jerusalem; but in 542 AD the Emperor Justinian ordered its celebration at Constantinople, as a thanksgiving for the cessation of plague. How - and when - in our very different, secular world we shall celebrate the eventual end of our current pandemic plague remains to be seen. Until that point, the Editor’s devout wish must be that all readers of *Exchanges* will remain safe and well!

John Caperon

Editor

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All Members are invited to contribute to ‘Exchanges’, the quarterly of the T S Eliot Society (UK). If you would like to contribute or if you have queries or suggestions, contact the Editor direct at Exchanges@tseliotssociety.uk

T S Eliot: The Search for Happiness

The Search for Happiness, a documentary first shown last year on Sky Arts, is both tribute and memorial to a great poet, arguably the most influential writer of the 20th century. It's a compelling and coherent narrative of Eliot's life and his greatest works. Biographical details illuminate long, familiar passages from 'The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock', 'The Waste Land' and 'Four Quartets'. These details are provided by some of the most respected readers of Eliot in the UK and the US, and it is the clear focus of these voices that provides an empathetic narrative for the genesis of these great poems.

The opening of the documentary is melancholy in tone, detailing Eliot's lonely and isolated childhood, his unhappy first marriage and his love for Emily Hale. Images of childhood thread throughout: from Eliot's lonely,



childhood listening over the high-backed walls to voices described by Dr Sarah Kennedy as the 'sociable sounds' of the playground, to the line added to *The Waste Land* by Vivienne Haigh-Wood: 'What you get married for if you don't want children?' Dr Lyndall Gordon describes Eliot's earlier poems as Eliot writing 'through agonies', and the darkness of these times is perfectly represented by the gloriously rich, black and white photography and film bringing to life the lines read so well by Alex Hassell.

Eliot's links to 'Bloomsbury' are explored, and there are amusing snippets from the Woolfs which will delight the viewer, before the film moves on to the later period of 'Four Quartets'. Again, relevant biographical details bring particular lines of Eliot's masterpiece to life. Here, there is a change in the cinematography to better reflect Eliot's more meditative poems. Aerial filming in subtly understated tones illustrates 'Burnt Norton', 'East Coker' and 'Little Gidding', clearly locating the poems within the landscape.

Eliot is presented as a complex personality: a man of many masks. A man who suffers for that which he creates but also a man with a playful private side. Questions about whether Eliot was a misogynist or an anti-Semite are briefly referenced towards the end of the documentary. It is right to ask these questions; but they are not the focus of this film.

T S Eliot: The Search for Happiness is a highly successful documentary. Lines of poetry provide glimpses of Eliot the man as much as the biographical details give depth to one's own interpretations. The tone of the production, particularly the measured speed of transition through apt images, make this a thoroughly enjoyable experience. Trevor Nunn and Andrew Lloyd Webber contribute to a more upbeat tone at the end of the film.

Eliot does find happiness at the end of his life, married for eight years to Valerie Eliot until his death in 1965. Robert McCrum amusingly describes Valerie as a 'fan-girl groupie'. I like that. I hope Valerie would too.

Christina Percy

T.S Eliot: The Search for Happiness, directed and produced by Adrian Munsey and Vance Goodwin, is now available on DVD

T S Eliot, Thomas Becket and the Rule of Law

29th December 2020 was the 850th anniversary of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket

‘Since the Holy Innocents a day: the fourth day from Christmas.’

So wrote T S Eliot at the start of the second act of ‘Murder in the Cathedral’, written for the 1935 Canterbury Festival, and first performed in the Chapter House at Canterbury, just a few yards from where, on 29th December 1170, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, was killed.



The Becket Casket, dating from ca.

1180-90 (Victoria and Albert Museum)

The assassination of Thomas Becket within his cathedral church shocked the whole of western Christendom. Within three years he had been canonized, his name added to the roll of saints of the Church, and King Henry II had been forced to do penance for his role in Becket's death. From Iceland to Italy there are churches dedicated to St Thomas of Canterbury, and relics, statues and images date from just a few years after 1170 (See left).

The cause for which Becket died, however, is not one that today we necessarily regard as unambiguously right. As Eliot has the assassins remind his audience, the rule of law that we treasure as a great protection was begun by the very reforms of Henry II that Becket stood against. ‘Remember,’ says the Second Knight in his speech to the audience, ‘remember that it is we who took the first step. We have been instrumental in bringing about the state of affairs that you approve.’

And yet we cannot easily regard the murder of Becket as justified, even if we can agree with some of the sentiments Eliot has the knights express. The end does not justify the means. The powerful cannot go around murdering those they disagree with, whether they be political rivals or obstacles (as Becket had become to Henry II), or the weak and impoverished (as the boys of Bethlehem were to Herod).

The rule of law that Henry II wanted to introduce disallows that arbitrary exercise of power. The murder of Thomas Becket reminds us still that the rule of law (tempered by equity and mercy) is fundamental to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and that it applies as much if not more to the rich and powerful and to rulers as it does to the dispossessed, the powerless and the ruled. Those in power must always be held to account for their treatment of those who are in their power.

‘To-day, what is to-day?’

‘Let our thanks ascend

To God, who has given us another Saint in Canterbury.’

‘Blessed Thomas, pray for us.’

Simon Kershaw

‘Henry ... was ahead of his time. He believed in one law for all, provided it was the King's law....

Becket's cause is not our own But too often his courage is not our own either.’

(Justin Welby, from a sermon in Southwark Cathedral on 11th December 2020)

‘A Cold Coming’: Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi’

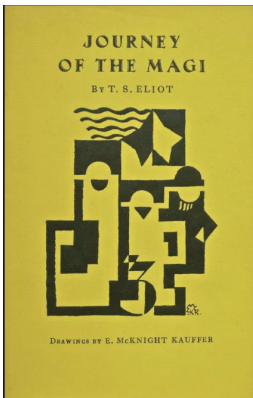
The crib has its annual outing in our little village church each Christmas. The figures are stylised, but feel realistic. Baby Jesus arrives on Christmas morning, and the three kings at Epiphany; and there they all stay until the eve of Candlemas. The kings are definitely crowned kings; and one is clearly black. How the uncounted ‘wise men’ of Matthew’s Gospel turned into ‘three kings’ is interesting enough; but how did they become ‘magi’, and what do Eliot’s Magi add to the still developing tradition?

The ‘magi’ question has an easy answer. Matthew used the Greek term for wise men, or sages, *magoi*, and there you are. But why three? And why kings? The threefold gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh must have given rise to the number, it appears. But it was the 2nd /3rd century theologian and apologist Tertullian who first referred to the magi as kings. By the 6th century they were generally regarded as kings, and had acquired their names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. By the time of the Venerable Bede in the 8th century, Balthasar was also black.



*The Adoration of the Magi (1510)
by Hieronymus Bosch (detail)*

Almost a century after Eliot’s poem, first published in 1927, it seems he has been influential in developing the Magi tradition. To begin with, Eliot has brought into the modern consciousness the idea of the ‘cold coming’, the winter journey, borrowed from Bishop of Winchester Lancelot Andrewes’ Christmas sermon of 1622. Eliot was blasé about his borrowing, even if we don’t have to take literally (or should we, perhaps?) his assertion to Conrad Aiken that he wrote the poem ‘in three quarters of an hour ... one Sunday morning, with the assistance of half a bottle of Booth’s gin.’



TS Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi’, 1927

In its hundred years’ circulation, ‘Journey of the Magi’ has spread other notions about the Magi than the hardness of their winter journey. The camels ‘galled, sore-footed, refractory, /Lying down in the melting snow’ are now part of the picture. And the previous, sybaritic lives of the Magi – set in ‘summer palaces on slopes’, with ‘the silken girls bringing sherbet’ are similarly in the frame; as are the ‘cursing and grumbling’ camel men, ‘wanting their liquor and women’. It is as if Eliot has added a whole layer of verisimilitude, of human recognisability, to the Magi tradition, much as Renaissance artists brought their own visual detail to the Adoration of the Magi.

Beyond verisimilitude, there is the power of Eliot’s symbolism. The ‘three trees on the low sky’, the ‘old white horse’ which galloped away, the ‘dicing for pieces of silver’: all these have a force in and beyond themselves, and resonate particularly with the reader who is familiar with the Christian story. And, drawing on the earliest tradition - embodied in Matthew’s narrative - of the symbolic significance of the Magi’s gifts, Eliot turns a story about a birth into a story anticipating death. The unsettling, disturbing power of uncertainty and faith runs through the poem.

Eliot has picked up a long and ancient Magi tradition, added to it the distinctive contribution of his beloved 17th century, and re-charged it with his own individual vision. Our simple Christmas crib evokes the narrative; in ‘Journey of the Magi’ Eliot clothes that narrative with human detail.

Coming to – and appreciating – Eliot

Until very recently I was a student, completing my MSc in Pharmacology at Oxford. My interest in poetry developed around a year and a half ago, when I came across an old and dusty ‘Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse’ in a bookshelf at home. It contained a few of Eliot’s poems, and it was ‘The Burial of The Dead’ which really caught my attention, prompting me to seek out and buy his ‘Selected Poems’.

Since then I have been exploring his works fairly consistently, albeit slowly, including his essays and plays. I’ve also looked at biographies and documentaries; and I have written a couple of pieces about Eliot, one for the student newspaper ‘The Cherwell’, and one for a literary review which a friend is starting soon. One highlight from the past year was being able to see Jeremy Irons reading ‘Four Quartets’ at the Sheldonian Theatre, followed by Beethoven’s String Quartet Opus 132.

It is the astonishing originality of Eliot’s poems that keeps me hooked, and particularly their atmospheric, ominous quality, most evident to me in ‘The Waste Land’. Despite that, I find the later poems to be a source of

comfort, which has proven quite useful since the onset of the pandemic!

For me, one of the most memorable passages in Eliot is the one beginning ‘What might have been is an abstraction’ from the opening section of ‘Burnt Norton’. This warning against wallowing in regret reflects, I think, the more optimistic nature of the Quartets, and stands in stark contrast to his bleak ‘Prufrock’ and ‘Waste Land’. In this



A seasonal view of the garden at Burnt Norton

passage, he does the opposite of what poetry seems often to do, which is take a complex concept and deliver it in a few concise lines. Instead, Eliot offers beauty in place of a cold instruction to just ‘accept the past’. There is nothing glamorous about accepting a hard past or the things one hasn’t done, yet Eliot finds a way to make the advice memorable. A warning about futility has never looked, nor sounded, so good.

It is the one example in the Quartets of him directly contextualising and elaborating on the time-past-being-in-time-present wordplay. See: ‘What might have been and what has been/ Point to one end, which is always present’. It is not only what we have done that makes us who we are now, but also the things that we know we have not done. By learning from wasted opportunities, those ‘perpetual possibilities’, we can change ourselves and improve our present.

The most vivid image is provided by the line; ‘Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose leaves’. Great lines of poetry can almost stimulate your sense of touch, as if you can feel the wipe of the dust with your finger, and sense it unsettle, diffusing through the air and onto your arm (this is reminiscent of the later line in ‘Burnt Norton’; ‘dust on an old man’s sleeve’). The ‘echo’ of the ‘Footfalls’ adds an auditory element, creating

further depth and clarity to the mental image. I particularly like the way Eliot confidently says that his words ‘echo / Thus, in your mind’, as if he knows that his words resonate.

In this passage we also see the rose garden, which seems to represent something so dear to him that he re-uses the metaphor in ‘A Dedication to My Wife’, one of his last ever poems: ‘The roses in the rose-garden which is ours and ours only’. Perhaps it was through following his own advice that, instead of the ‘rose garden’ being merely an imagined past, he managed finally to find it, in the form of love and happiness, for the last eight years of his life. As he wrote to Ezra Pound in 1959 of his second wife Valerie: ‘She gives me the first happiness I have ever known.’



Roses in the Burnt Norton garden

Jack Glynne-Jones