T S ELIOT SOCIETY

OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

Exchanges...

Winter 2026

The current exhibition at Tate Britain of work by the photographer Lee Miller provides an occasion to share this portrait of Eliot, which she took for Vogue UK November 1949

Editorial

As winters go, this has been just another one. But its distinctiveness has perhaps been in the extremities of weather experienced here in the UK. Gloriously clear and crisp days around the Festival itself, but then deep snow and subsequent lashings of wind and rain quite beyond expectation. It's therefore somehow appropriate that the T S Eliot Prize for Poetry 2025 has just been awarded to the Canadian poet Karen Solie, one of whose main concerns is the environmental crisis, our destructive human impact on the natural world. I'll take a look at her prizewinning collection, *Wellwater*, later in this edition of 'Exchanges'.

While some poets rise to widespread public attention, others leave us altogether. The death of Tony Harrison during last Autumn deprived us of a major voice, one which had ranged widely across poetry, translation and drama, and had always been distinctive in its Northern origin. A powerful, genuine, regional, voice, he had little time for what he perceived as pretentious, metropolitan poetry: Simon Armitage recalls him once saying that T S Eliot had "taken English poetry back 100 years." Hmm. Responses, anyone?

Harrison's 'Them & [uz]' contrasts the language use of pupils like him who proudly inhabited working-class Leeds culture, with that of the grammar school teachers who promoted RP, 'received pronunciation', as the only proper spoken code for literature:

'We say [As] not [uz], TW!' That shut my trap.
I doffed my flat a's (as in 'flat cap')
my mouth all stuffed with glottals, great
lumps to hawk up and spit out … E -nun-ci- ate!

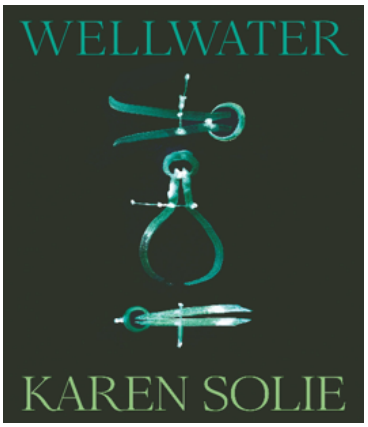
The furore created by Harrison's powerful 1985 description of British social division, 'V', performed on TV in 1987, brought him to the attention of a wide public; but during a long writing life he never quite received the recognition he deserved. His animosity towards Eliot persisted; he told *The Oxford Student* that "Poetry in the theatre had been rather ruined by T.S. Eliot", and that "we were stuck with a rather prosaic theatre, still sort of confined to drawing rooms"; again, partly because of "Eliot's boring plays." Yet the title of his poem occasioned by the Iraq war was 'A Cold Coming'. Or was he channelling Lancelot Andrewes?

Time moves on, and Easter comes early this year. Ash Wednesday is on February 18th, and in his contribution to this *Exchanges*, my clerical colleague Canon John Wall reflects on the place Eliot's 'Four Quartets' has in his Lenten life. New contributor Zebedee Alby also references 'Four Quartets', but describes his regrettable initial introduction to Eliot's works by a woefully misinformed A level teacher, fortunately one which his own insight saw through. In our final article, Society Secretary/Treasurer Kathy Radley offers her response to actor Adrian Dunbar's widely-advertised London presentation of 'The Waste Land'. *The Times* opined that Dunbar himself was scarcely evident: 'He did indeed give a little speech at the start, but then disappeared and it was hard to detect evidence of his direction in the ensuing performance, other than perhaps telling the actors to stand when they spoke and sit down afterwards.' Kathy is markedly less scathing.

John Caperon
Editor

Exchanges *is the quarterly members' newsletter of the T.S. Eliot Society (UK). If you would like to contribute or if you have queries or suggestions please contact the Editor direct at* Exchanges@tseliotsociety.uk

The T S Eliot Prize for Poetry 2025



Some years ago my wife and I were at the Royal Festival Hall to hear the shortlisted poets for the Prize giving their readings. Sad to say, the noise from the bar prevented our making any sense of the occasion at all. This year, though, the joy of live streaming brought the shortlisted poets direct to my laptop – so much easier! – and we listened in peace. My notes reveal a range of responses, in no particular order: 'good metaphor, but what about shape or form?'; 'intense observation'; 'attention-seeking poetry'; serious and reflective'; 'so much rhetoric!'; 'spare economy'; 'verbosity'; simply, 'Wow!'.

The event was educative. I was surprised by the extent to which poets seem currently to be avoiding traditional form and metre; unsurprised, though, by the focus on distinctively 21st century preoccupations. And it perhaps says something about my age that of all the poets, it was the older ones I found most impressive – Gillian Allnut and Tom Paulin: there was something rather telling about Gillian Allnot finishing her reading with a haiku. Simply on the basis of the readings, for my money it would have been one of this pair who ran off with the prize. But of course, there's more to it than a reading, and poems are more than things heard: most of us read a writer's collection, though I see that now some poetry websites are preferring readings-aloud to text; text as afterthought, almost.

But to the Prize. The 2025 winner of the T S Eliot prize was announced the day after the shortlist readings as the Canadian poet Karen Solie, for her *Wellwater*. Chair of the judging panel Michael Hofmann said: "In Karen Solie we have an outstanding winner. The poems of *Wellwater* come from the whole of an adventurously lived life. They hold the two sentiments, The world is a beautiful place / The world is a terrible place, in perfect equipoise. They offer no happy endings, no salvation in past or future, in epiphany or private happiness. And yet they are anything but grim, with an ironic humour that plays over our increasingly euphemism-hungry culture."

It's worth reflecting on Michael Hofmann's comments on the state of poetry, drawn from his experience of reading some ten thousand pages of the submitted collections. His initial comments are humorous, declaring his dislike for: "Books starting on page 1 (something I deprecate). Books longer than I remember books being. What happened to 48 pp? Or even 64 pp? Books coming with pages, sometimes many pages, of notes. More thanks in them than an Oscar speech…" But he also observes that: "It seems … that there's been a turn to abstract speech, inhuman speech, impersonal speech … A poem is now the home for randomised and intelligent and inorganic speech. A conveyor of information. A kind of insider trading…"

The question for readers of Karen Solie's *Wellwater* may be, then, whether her language is 'randomised', whether it is abstract or impersonal. *Wellwater* certainly has (helpful and informative) notes and an array of Oscar-like thanks; but there is something direct, concrete and real-life about, for example, her 'That which is learned in youth is always most familiar'. The poem – written in loose quatrains – recounts the writer's conversation with her five-year-old nephew, 'returning from a walk through the fields'. The child is fascinated by a 'clod of earth' he's picked up; to him, it is 'an accident. Will never happen again'. Echoing that great poet of the natural world, Gerard Manley Hopkins, the child – and the poet – have been confronted by the unique

'thisness' of nature.

Solie's collection contains a broadside against the chemico-industrialisation of nature in her native Canada, the omnipresence of huge business interests in the agricultural process, as here in 'Red Spring':

By the power of Bayer (née Monsanto) the chemical
is wedded to the seed. They are literally
made for each other. There is no getting back. Yet still
nature lurks within the soil….

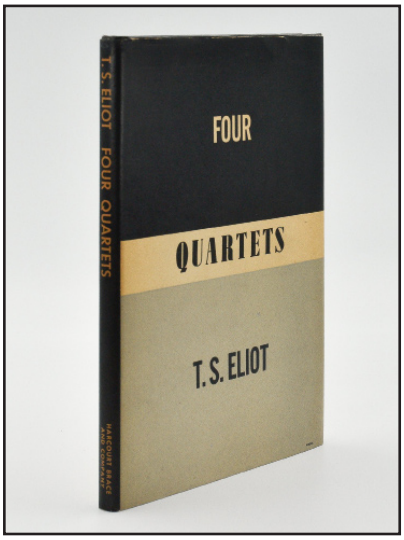
At the heart of her fine collection, Solie is pleading for a humble economy, a gentle walking on the earth; personal attitudes towards the given realities of life are key - in 'Next Life', for instance, she describes what is left when an old woman dies:

… . The world
Used her right up, along with the little she'd been given.
But everything she'd been given she found a use for.

Solie employs a range of quasi-traditional poetic forms – unrhymed quatrains, tercets, couplets; and there are even two near-sonnets towards the end of the book – but there is little conformity to metrical pattern, as if these restraints are unhelpful to the core message of her poems. Her language is vivid, concrete, personal; she is, indeed, an outstanding winner.

John Caperon

Good Friday – reading *Four Quartets*



I was at a talk given by the splendid and terrifying artist Maggi Hambling. She mentioned that every Good Friday, she creates a painting or drawing on an Easter theme. Intrigued, in the questions session afterwards, I asked her why. She glared at me from under her beetling brows, shrugged her shoulders and said: 'I don't know: I just do', which put me in my place. It did, though, make me think about my own habitual Good Friday ritual, which I have been doing for over four decades, namely sitting down and reading aloud *Four Quartets*.

I first came across Eliot when I 'did' *Four Quartets* for A-Level in 1978, taught to me by a scary English teacher, Norman Siviter, who used to cover his right hand in chalk dust and wander from block to block shouting 'Unclean! Unclean!' and covering any child who got in his way in handprints. Despite this somewhat unorthodox approach, he really opened the text for me, and, in 1979 armed with a *Complete Poems of T.S. Eliot* purchased from Foyles, I launched into a lifetime of Eliot appreciation.

This takes various forms. In Covid lockdown, for example, our household amused itself by doing a

dramatic reading of *Murder in the Cathedral*, each of us taking turns in playing Thomas. But most unusually, I suppose, is that I have bits of 'Burnt Norton' stencilled around my sitting room, edited, I'm afraid, to fit the wall lengths which I am sure will horrify purists. I have done this in my last four houses, and I think that is a key to how Eliot works with me: the text is always there and I revisit it in different places and at different stages of my life and a 'palimpsest' of associations, meanings and resonances has built up over the last forty-five years, and continues to do so.

I am a parish priest, and Eliot has been a constant companion in services: 'A Song for Simeon' at candlelit evensongs at Candlemas (I had a signed Ariel Poem edition which, alas, I suspect was eaten by the dog); 'The Journey of the Magi' at Epiphany Carols; pilgrimages where 'Little Gidding's

...You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid...

has been a constant, often repeated mantra to ground pilgrims on the way.

St Stephen's, Gloucester Road

There is a real depth of Christian belief in the poetry, a bedrock of faith which for Eliot – for twenty-five years a churchwarden at St. Stephen's, Gloucester Road and loyal Anglo-Catholic – were at the heart of who and what he was. All of which, I suppose, brings me back to my annual reading of *Four Quartets*.

Every year after the Passion Gospel, the Liturgy of Good Friday, the Veneration of the Cross, the Mass of the pre-sanctified (all of which Eliot would have known well) I allow myself a little personal space in the last gasp of Lent before the next day's run up to the Easter Vigil, to sit down, in the garden if possible, and re-read the well-worn words. I usually read it by myself, but sometimes with others. Most poignantly during the Covid Lockdown, as the churches were shut, it itself became my Good Friday devotion, the words bringing comfort, rootedness in the past and hope for the future. As the opening words of 'Burnt Norton' put it:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

These words settle me each time. I begin the journey through the garden to the concrete pool filled 'with water out of sunlight', and so I enter something timeless, touching base with an eternity Eliot has for me articulated despite his fury that words:

… slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

So many phrases echo for me every time I read them: 'Go, go, go said the bird: humankind cannot bear very much reality' (which I have engraved on a stone tablet in my garden); ' the still point of the turning world'; 'Home is where one starts from. /As we grow older / The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated /Of dead and living'; 'Sin is Behovely, but / All shall be well, and /
All manner of thing shall be well.'

As I read, I pick up these fragments, (this last from St. Julian of Norwich) each year turning them in my mind like smooth pebbles, revisiting who I was, and thinking of who in my life I am now. It is for me a sort of 'anamnesis', the liturgical bringing of the past into the present, no more so than in 'East Coker' V in the last stanza-

The dripping blood our only drink,
The bloody flesh our only food:
In spite of which we like to think
That we are sound, substantial flesh and blood—
Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.

Ultimately, I suppose – rather like Maggi Hambling – I can't really articulate why this yearly ritual is important to me. Ultimately, I just do it.

John Wall
Canon John Wall is an Anglican priest, and Rector of Uckfield, a market town in East Sussex

My first introduction to Eliot …

I was eighteen years old and in an A level English class at Isleworth College near Hounslow, West London when I first encountered the poetry of T.S. Eliot. The Teacher whose name I have long forgotten (he was not one of those fabled teachers who are thanked by grateful students years after for inspiring them) read aloud 'The Love Song Of J.Alfred Prufrock'. Afterwards he explained that the opening lines didn't mean anything, that it was poetry in the neighbourhood of Dylan Thomas's, meaningless with just the 'feel' of the obscure, intended meaning. That they were just words calculated to shock the sensibilities of poetry readers of the time, by dragging English poetry into the modern era.

On the contrary, I knew the opening lines were precise, and could intuit exactly how the sunset spread across the sky would resemble the sprawled-out, uncoordinated awareness of the anaesthetized patient. But I was one of those young men who could not put more than two grunts together, and could not speak, not because of looking into the 'heart of light' but at the epitome of stupidity.

I used to lie face down on the narrow bed in my tiny bedroom with the sunlight perennially, in memory, afiring the bedspread and get the urge to go to the Library, on the porchstep of which were engraved the inaccurate words 'Knowledge is Power'. And I remember wondering 'How is Knowledge Power? I have some knowledge, but nil power.'

I also used to think lying face down why do I now need to get up, put my shoes on, and have the equivalent thought to prepare a face to meet the faces that we meet' before reading those words. Why, I thought to myself, does there need to be an intervening period between determining to do something and achieving it? Why, when I decide to go to the Library, can't I just be there? Why the requirement for the consideration of Space and Time?

Returning from the Library with *The Collected Poems of T.S. Eliot*, lying face down on the bed with the sunlight streaming in perennially in memory, I would read through the poems, and think, 'I have no idea what these words mean, but they are beautifully put-together'. So many years later, I know what some of *Four Quartets* means, and find the idea of reading through some sections uninviting, but as with a film made by Stanley Kubrick which you turn on as you flip through the channels, you get hooked and mesmerised and have to watch the rest of the movie to the end. That is one of my definitions of real Art.

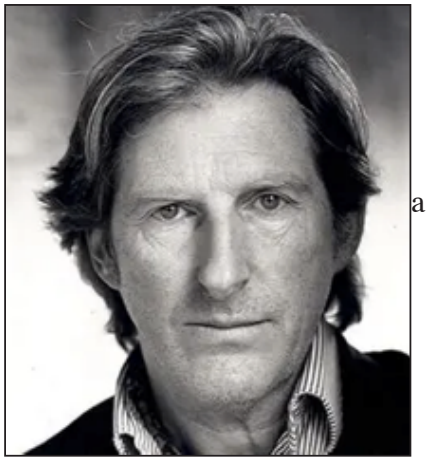
Zebedee Alby
Born and brought up in Malaysia, Zebedee Alby worked as a Civil Service accountant before his retirement.

Adrian Dunbar's presentation of 'The Waste Land'

Two performances of The Waste Land *at the Queen Elizabeth Hall directed by celebrated Irish actor Adrian Dunbar were presented as part of the EFG London Jazz Festival, which ran from 14th to 23rd November 2025, celebrating both established and upcoming jazz musicians. Dunbar is to be congratulated in securing permission from the Eliot Estate to devise an arrangement of the poem for four actors and a jazz orchestra, who played music by the composer Nick Roth.*

'I was fifteen when an English teacher named Keith Yorke took us through The Waste Land, decoding its mysteries. I could never thank him enough.' So, Adrian Dunbar began his moving introduction to the performance, before the dramatic music of the overture took us on a jazz exploration of the poem. The readers were Anna Nygh, Orla Charlton, Frank McCusker and Stanley Townsend. Dunbar divided the lines between them, as appropriate to Eliot's changing cast of characters. The music provided interludes between the

five parts of the poem, in accordance with the Eliot estate's stipulation that the music could not be played simultaneously with the readings. Jazz was a suitable genre to select as the poem was published in 1922 amid the social and cultural energy of the 1920s.



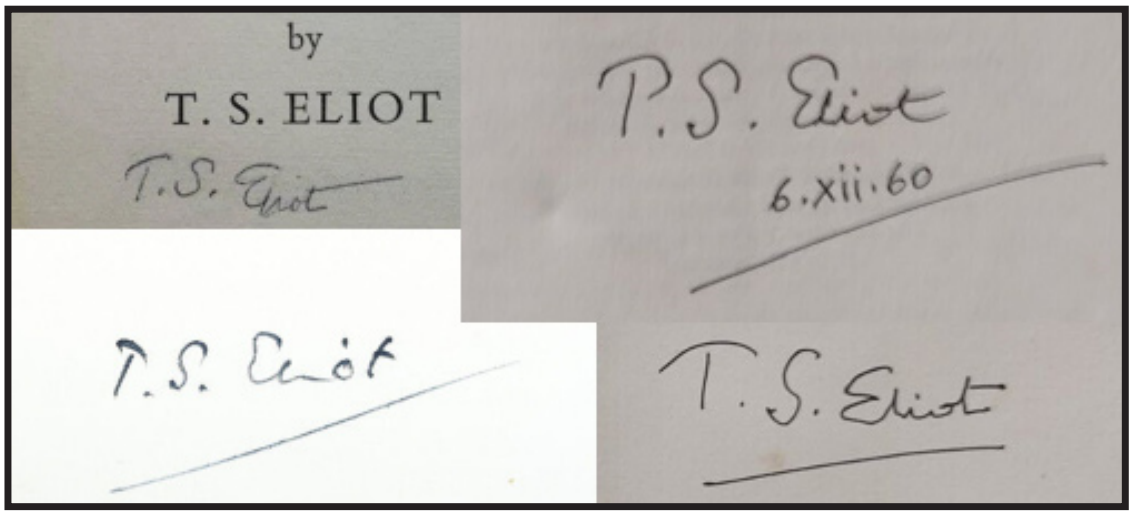
Adrian Dunbar

Composer Roth had a huge challenge in responding to a text which includes references to Arthurian legend, The Fisher King, Tarot, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christian philosophy. He provided plenty of dissonance and loud drumbeats, which cleverly illustrated aspects of what was being conveyed by the poem, until a musical shift came accompanied by archive film footage of London in the 1920s, reflecting a more contemporary feel for a while. The drama intensified again with use of percussive style piano and drums until the final lines of the fifth and last section of Eliot's infinitely imaginative poem were reached; the Hindu prayer for peace: "Shanti, shanti, shanti." Underlined by Roth's sustained ending note.

This was an enjoyable evening despite my few reservations. I felt that, as Adrian Dunbar was given such prominence in the title and promotion of the event, the audience, who would have included fans of the actor, might have expected to see more of him than just his brief introduction, excellent though it was. The four actors should have been introduced and named, and it was a bit of a stretch to bill the performance as 'multimedia' on the strength of a few archive film clips. However, Jazz music, particularly with such accomplished musicians, provided a fitting backdrop for the poem's idiosyncratic structure. The performance did manage to augment the poem's text without overwhelming it and was successful in creating a vivid and meaningful experience.

Kathy Radley

Envoi...



Given the rarity value of books "signed by T.S. Eliot", it's perhaps not surprising to find some offered for sale whose signatures seem less...*persuasive* than others. Can you spot the only one of these four whose authenticity is confirmed? Answer below.

The signature bottom left, taken from a numbered limited edition