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Glen Cavaliero: Two Tributes

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Abstract

Two tribute pieces about Glen Cavaliero, a founder-member of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society and for many years the referee for articles submitted to the Journal.

Keywords Glen Cavaliero; rural tradition; comedy; supernatural; Sylvia Townsend Warner; Mabel Mercer.

Editor's note: Many members of the STW Society will have been saddened to hear of the death of Glen Cavaliero on 28 October 2019. Glen was one of the earliest members of the Warner Society and for many years the referee for articles submitted to the Journal. A poet as well as critic, a vicar before becoming a teacher, a gentle, humorous, complex man, he was the sort of academic met with more often a few decades ago than now. He contributed a foreword to Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Bibliography by Ray Russell and J. Lawrence Mitchell, published in paperback this year by Tartarus Press (and to be reviewed in the next issue of the Journal). It included this touching memory:

For Sylvia Townsend Warner is a tonic writer. To read a story of hers while suffering from depression is, as I once found out for myself, a curative experience. With some diffidence I wrote to tell her this, and received a characteristically generous answer. 'I hope you won't mind if I disprove your statement that you probably possess every book I have published. I think you cannot have this by-blow.' Enclosed was an inscribed copy of Two Conversation Pieces, evidence of an unerring perception as to what would give most pleasure. (p. 10)

In tribute to Glen we are printing these two tributes, reprinted by kind permission of the Powys Society (in whose Newsletter for March 2020 they first appeared) and of the authors, Paul Hartle and John Hodgson.

A eulogy for Glen Cavaliero delivered at his funeral at St Catharine's College, Cambridge

Paul Hartle

When, some years ago, Glen asked me to be his executor, I thanked him for this 'melancholy privilege', and I am again privileged to offer this tribute to him. Although 'tribute' is appropriate, for much is owed, I prefer 'eulogy' – from the Greek 'good words', because Glen was not only deserving of them, but a master of them himself. And, while in one sense 'melancholy' is right, because we are all of us sad that Glen is absent from our conversation, the blackness in that word is not right, because Glen loved (and wore) bright and colourful things, and we have chosen to reflect that in the flowers in this Chapel and on his coffin.

Good words then, and when I invited Glen's friends and pupils to provide me with some – and many have – I was struck by several responses suggesting that their best Glen stories might lack the gravity appropriate for the occasion; one promised: 'I will try to remember one of Glen's limericks suitable for an airing in the Chapel: I may be some time!' This saintly verse has never appeared. Occasionally indeed, like Falstaff, Glen was 'little better than one of the wicked', in a strictly conversational context, delighting in the deflation of the pompous in spirit and the inexact in speech.

I knew him first as a teacher; when I came to the College he had already been here for several years, first as a mature undergraduate and then working towards his doctorate, and – like generations of St Catharine's students – I was thrilled to be supervised in a real house – 'beautiful but wholly impractical' writes another alumnus – in Portugal Place. A now quite well-known BBC correspondent – let us call him 'Trevor' – when interviewed in recent years by *Varsity*, remembered his supervisions with 'a poet who had two cats that would claw men's soft parts during practical criticism'; the next day he received a postcard. It said, economically, 'Dear Trevor, There was only one cat. Yours, Glen.' Farewell, Victoria (she was the cat). A more attentive student writes that Glen's supervisions were 'the epitome of the Cambridge experience for

me – learning and exposure to our beloved literature without the sense of feeling judged’.

But a proper reluctance to judge did not mean that Glen’s supervisions were in any way undemanding; I think of him as possessing a kindly astringency – an astringent kindness? – while a colleague notes that there was often a glint rather than a twinkle in the Cavaliero eye.

‘Looking back at all that generation,’ writes one friend, ‘I really think Glen was one of the most imaginative and productive, and surely ... had the most beneficial influence.’ Something which Glen’s charm, warmth and humour could too easily make us forget is that productivity and influence. Alongside his monographs on John Cowper Powys, E.M. Forster and Charles Williams there are the three books which give a proper sense of his range: *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel*, *The Supernatural and English Fiction* and *The Alchemy of Laughter: Comedy and English Fiction*. No other scholar could have written them; in the words of one of his oldest friends:

Seldom has anybody known English fiction so thoroughly or so diversely, or been able to recall its details with such ready sharpness. On both my visits to Pinehurst this year ... as proof against any suspicion I might have that his mental powers were fading, Glen offered to provide titles, name of publisher, date of publication, and plot summaries of all twenty-four of the novels of Bulwer-Lytton. When short term memory loss exasperated him, I would reassure him that his knowledge of novels must be stored somewhere else. Of course, he said, almost indignantly, I could never forget a novel.

One of his most recent students recalls a friend ‘asking Glen if he’d read everything in the canon, and he said yes’; another shrewdly points out that Glen’s range of reading made him a uniquely ‘great recommender’ of reading to others. And to his influential teaching and books we must add countless prefaces, introductions and scholarly notes on figures as diverse as the Powys Family (where he was the acknowledged expert and President of the Powys Society since 1985) and Beatrix Potter.

So, the countryside, the numinous (I thank thee, Glen, for teaching me that word) and the comic were the three topics of his most ambitious books, and also the subjects of so much of his poetry across the 40 years of its publication. The seven collections begin with *The Ancient People* in 1973; Glen met me coming out of Deighton Bell’s bookshop in

Trinity Street, clutching a copy which he instantly signed, and I think he valued my good taste and prudence ever since. My copy of the culmination of his work as a poet, the new and collected poems in *A Flash of Weathercocks*, is inscribed, 'the climax to the road to Deighton Bell'.

Poet, Scholar, Teacher – or 'inspirer of joy' to quote another student, and also Fellow Commoner of this College, an honour which brought with it the role of luncher ['commoner' meaning that he shared in fellows' commons [meals], not that he was in any sense less uncommon than the rest of us]. Glen was proud that he had been elected into this role when it lacked any statute of limitation; mere fellows or even masters required re-election at intervals and so – under revised procedures – did more recently elected Fellow Commoners – he alone, *sui generis*, needed no act of renewal.

He was widely loved throughout the college; a visiting friend returned to Pinehurst 'to find him in a particularly cheerful temper':

While you were out the telephone rang.... Unusual hour.... It was from the Lodge. One of the porters. Who'd noticed I hadn't been in to lunch.... He was calling to make sure I was all right.

The next time I'm in College I shall want to give that porter a hug.

PAUSE

Of course I won't. One doesn't do that.

PAUSE:

But OH! how GOOD they've all been to me....

Glen also had a clear sense of the duties of a Fellow Commoner: the eating of lunch, certainly – 'my gravy meal', as he called it – but also never to pry into or advise on college business, even to a pupil turned Senior Tutor, but always to welcome and converse interestedly with new fellows – especially the younger and less self-assured – and with the College's guests, as well as with us, his daily sparring-partners.

But if we would not speak of college politics (as if there *were* such a thing), then of what? Well, of books of course; and of films – but only if they antedated the 1960s; and of music, preferably jazz and ideally involving one or other of the many divas whom he cherished. All visitors to the Pinehurst flat were greeted by the photograph of Mabel Mercer signed 'To Glen and my Cambridge admirers'.

The programme of music and readings we are sharing today is what Glen himself proposed last year, although more recently he suggested that Sinatra and 'You make me feel so young' might fit the bill.

You make me feel there are songs to be sung
And a wonderful fling to be flung

Outside Glen's Pinehurst flat there is a poster, designed for the Cambridge Poetry Festival, of his poem, 'Hollywood the Golden'. In the *Flash of Weathercocks* collection, the poem is included in the section entitled 'Compensations: some counterbalance to the winter's dark':

'Hollywood the Golden'

Helen Kane, whose gay little girl's vice made the phrase 'boop-boop-a-doop' a part of the legend of the roaring 20s died yesterday at 62 after a 10-year battle with cancer.

From an American newspaper, 27 September 1966

Oh, the gay girl's gone now
 further than even she could dance,
far from the inter-stellar bars
 into her ultimate romance;

she's gone out to the metropole
 where the dead stars dine,
their dreams of silk and money blessed
 in haze of Metro Goldwyn wine.

There, Great Sugar daddy smiles
 on all his slim blonde babies,
on Carole Lombard, Thelma Todd
 and 'lovely Marion Davies'.

Where Connie Bennett pours the drinks
 Jeanette can sing for hours,
Louelwla still supplying news
 and Forest Lawn the flowers.

No longer do they have to pose
or answer the reporters;
their contracts now are at an end,
they rest by perfumed waters.

Jean Harlow finds her heart's desire,
there's peace for Clara Bow;
and her lost childhood is restored
to Marilyn Monroe.

And now another gay girl's gone,
another dancing daughter:
Boop-boop-a-doop! the darling sang,
till the cruel crab caught her.

For a brief while her face is seen:
Boop-boop-a-doop! the headlines hymn.
Do you remember Helen Kane?
The Broadway lights recede and dim,

for she is gone to the Good Place
where all the lovelies find their past
with Oscars they have never won,
their great comeback made at last.

First published in *Paradise Stairway* (1977)

'He is gone to the Good Place'. Thank you, Glen, for the good words – so many of them over so many years – and, yes, O great recommender, I promise I will try *again* to read *A Glastonbury Romance*.

Glen Cavaliero — a life in literature

John Hodgson

I first met Glen at Cambridge in 1972, when he was appointed to supervise me for a long essay on John Cowper Powys. He had only recently arrived in Cambridge. In mid-life, he had set aside a career in the Anglican ministry for a very uncertain future in English literature. His gamble

paid off. His PhD thesis was well received, and he became a fellow commoner at St Catharine's College, where he taught for over 40 years. I was one of the first of the privileged many to enter the charmed sitting room in Portugal Place, first as a student and later as a friend. Glen was not a guru and was hard even to consider as a mentor. More simply, he enjoyed sharing his immensely wide reading with others. Over the years I encountered an immense amount of literature through him. He could charm buried Victorians into life, rescue the unfairly relegated and champion the unknown.

Glen was born in Eastbourne, and after school at Tonbridge read history at Oxford. He went on to Ely Theological College before being ordained in Canterbury Cathedral. So it was as a young clergyman that Glen visited John Cowper Powys and Phyllis Playter at Blaenau Ffestiniog in 1957. John Cowper would have been surprised and touched to learn that 'the Reverend Cavaliero' should become the tireless and dedicated advocate of his works for 50 years after his death.

At the time I met him, Glen was organising the conference to mark John Cowper Powys's centenary at Churchill College, which assembled many literary great guns, and gave the fledgling Powys Society, of which Glen was chairman, a mighty energising boost. Soon after, Glen published his book, *John Cowper Powys: Novelist*. Glen claimed that the title's echo of F.R. Leavis's book on D.H. Lawrence was unconscious, but Glen's book was subtly Leavisite in the most generous and open sense, in its belief that the truth of life is more vividly reflected in the art of fiction than in philosophy or doctrine. (Glen had little time for John Cowper's 'lay sermons'.) Other books of criticism followed, notably *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel* (which also discusses T.F. Powys and Llewelyn), *A Reading of E.M. Forster* and Glen's own favourite, his 'spook book', *The Supernatural and English Fiction*. His criticism was appreciative and celebratory, and much of it drew attention to neglected writers. Glen singlehandedly saved the uncanny and disturbing novels of Phyllis Paul from total oblivion.

Not long after Glen's arrival in Cambridge, the English Faculty was engulfed in bitter debate over 'literary theory'. Glen took no part in this, and his generous liberal humanism fell out of fashion. But he acquired gravitas as the world around him became increasingly lightweight. The sheer breadth and depth of his reading commanded awe. He taught well into the present age when students assess their supervisors rather than the other way round, and announced to me, 'My students say I give them the most demanding teaching they've ever experienced, and it's just me rambling about books as usual.'

Glen began publishing his poetry shortly after he arrived in Cambridge. His poems are intricately wrought, with an exquisite sense of verbal sonority (the collected poems are dedicated to the memory of the cabaret singer Mabel Mercer). They are steeped in a spirit of place, or many different places, for Glen knew and loved almost every part of the British Isles, understanding local particulars of geology and architecture, history and literary association. Besides the Kent and Sussex of his youth, he evoked particularly the West Country and Wales of the Powyses, but also understated counties such as Huntingdonshire. His greatest love was perhaps for the Lake District, where he climbed peaks well into his eighties. There are many churches in his poems, instinct with meaning and often suggestive of the mystery of religious experience, for after his departure from the ministry Glen retained what I think of as an indirect and ambivalent attitude to faith. There are many tributes to friendship, poems dedicated to friends, tributes to hosts and visitors.

Glen was best visited at 3.30 p.m., which allowed for a very extended tea, served sacramentally in a cherished tea service, the gift of one of his close friends. His talk would range widely over the Powyses, forgotten Hollywood starlets and Victorian church architecture, but also contemporary political life to which he was closely tuned, even though he refused to compromise with the modern world in various principles: he never owned a television, still less a computer. To drive with Glen on a church crawl was unforgettable, for there was not a tower or steeple in the remotest village with which he was not familiar. But the drive would require some organisation, because Glen refused to be taken on a motorway, or to enter a pub with piped music.

His last years were made happy by his close association with St Catharine's College, where he would walk each day to lunch. Entering the Senior Common Room, he could disconcert the younger dons, brooding over their grant applications and impact assessments, by announcing 'I've just been re-reading *Redgauntlet*'. The college fellows and staff were touchingly attentive to him in his last months, and the college honoured him proudly at his funeral in the packed chapel. I remember mentioning to Glen the shock of the stark *logos* in his poem 'Memorial Services': 'The sting of death is love.' 'Yes, that's real, isn't it,' he said.

Note on contributors

Paul Hartle is Emeritus Fellow of English at St Catharine's College, Cambridge, and a former senior tutor and lecturer in English at St Catharine's. He has held visiting professorships in the United States and Japan. He edited the first complete edition of *The Poetry of Charles Cotton* for Oxford University Press in 2017.

John Hodgson read English at the University of Cambridge and was Chairman of the Powys Society from 2005 to 2010. He has worked as a translator and interpreter for the United Nations and other international organisations, and he has translated numerous books by Ismail Kadare and Fatos Lubonja from Albanian.