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4-1-2005

Tributes & Remembrances

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Recommended Citation

Deredita, Laurie M. and Rogers, Brian D., "Tributes & Remembrances" (2005). *Friends of the Library Occasional Publications*. Paper 1.
<http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/folpub/1>

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CHARLES PRICE
(1923-2003)

TRIBUTES  REMEMBRANCES

FROM A MEMORIAL SERVICE
HELD AT HARKNESS CHAPEL
CONNECTICUT COLLEGE
APRIL 13, 2004

Published by The Friends of the Connecticut College Library
Charles E. Shain Library
2005

Edited by Brian D. Rogers and Laurie M. Deredita

Designed by Susan Lindberg

“GENEROUS COLLEAGUE AND BENEVOLENT PRESENCE”

Barbara Zabel
Professor of Art History

I've been asked to give an overview of Charles Price's life, a quite impossible task, given the complex person he was. But I'll try to give a sense of at least some of the many lives he led.

The first of his lives was in music: as a boy growing up in Roxbury, Massachusetts, he somehow found his way to Boston to sing in the choir of Trinity Church; from that point on music was a passion that defined his life — indeed it may have extended it. After he could no longer easily get to New York to attend the opera, he listened to music on a portable CD player. He proudly noted in one of his postcards that he had purchased it on sale at Bradlees: “I was able to shut out the world and immerse in music.” And he added: “I might want to go on for 80,” which in fact he did.

After graduating from high school, Charles enlisted in the Army and served in the European Theater during World War II. He was in a field artillery unit at the Battle of the Bulge, where he had the unhappy duty of typing obituaries for less fortunate soldiers. The War was an immensely disturbing experience for Charles, and he found solace in music. I'm quite certain that his passion for Messiaen grew out of that experience. Messiaen wrote and performed his “Quartet for the End of Time” in a prisoner of war camp in Germany (1940). Reading about a recent performance of this quartet at Carnegie Hall made me appreciate the associations Charles brought to this hauntingly beautiful music, and it saddened me that he could not attend the performance, hear it on CD, or even read about it in *The New Yorker*.

Another phenomenon which defined Charles's life was, of course, art. After the War, Charles studied at the Boston Museum School, an endeavor cut short by the onset of tuberculosis which he had contracted during military service. He was sent to a sanatorium, quite certain

that this was his final destination. Three years later, however, streptomycin was discovered, which, as he put it, brought him back from the dead. These early brushes with death do much to explain his black humor — and perhaps, too, his enthusiasm for artist Edward Gorey.

Charles resumed his studies and received a bachelor's degree from the School of Music and Fine Art at Tufts College in 1954. He worked for one year as Art Supervisor in the public school system in Northampton, Massachusetts, and then taught art history for several years at Tufts University. In 1960, with the help of a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, Charles enrolled as a graduate student at Yale University and received a doctorate in nineteenth century French art in 1967. Because he was so much older than his fellow students, Charles became a kind of mentor to them, and they still speak of his great generosity. They looked up to Charles, figuratively as well as literally.

His life at Connecticut College began in 1965, when Charles joined the faculty and became a generous colleague for many of us, as well. Students, too, found in Charles a benevolent presence, and long after graduating they continue to express great affection and gratitude for his bringing the art of the past to life for them. And they still recount stories about Charles's memorable parties, some of which I suspect we'll hear about this morning. Charles had a comprehensive knowledge of art history and developed courses on the art of India, China, and Japan, the Ancient world, as well as many courses in his specialty, nineteenth century European art.

I recall being both flattered and absolutely terrified when Charles entrusted me with the teaching of one of his favorite courses before taking off for a sabbatical in Egypt: the course was French Realism, 1840 to 1880. Charles made his notes and his extensive library available to me, but what was not accessible to me was a lifetime of learning and the intimate connection Charles had with the art and life of the period. As those of you who have attended Charles's lectures are well aware, when he talked about the art of the nineteenth century, it was as if he had experienced its creation first hand (indeed, in a previous life he may well have).

Although Charles published no *magnum opus*, he did have a rich life in scholarship. Throughout his career, Charles produced a steady stream

of essays on varied topics, including H. H. Richardson drawings, Rockwell Kent and Thomas Nason prints, children's book illustration, Impressionist painting, and even contemporary artists, among them our own Maureen McCabe. Many of these essays were written for exhibitions he organized for the Lyman Allyn and Florence Griswold Museums, and for Shain Library. After his retirement in 1991, Shain Library became the focus of his considerable talents and his home away from home. He could often be seen there in recent years, stooped over the cases or walking with the aid of a cane. As an avid collector of prints and books, he took great pleasure in organizing exhibitions from the Library's Special Collections.

Finally, the most fundamental, but perhaps most hidden, of Charles's lives, was as an artist — and quite a talented one: after the service, you will see for yourself the wonderfully precise and evocative watercolors in an exhibition organized at Shain Library. Whether directed toward his own work, or the art of the past, Charles's eye was very discerning. His insights will continue to inform the way all of us who knew him look at and think about art and the world around us.



“AN UTTERLY UNIQUE AND MARVELOUS CHARACTER”

Christopher London, '76

My fondest memories of Charles Price began right with the first meeting at Smith-Burdick House; there he was — very tall and well above the crowd, dressed in a suit, sporting a string bowtie, rocking/swaying on his large feet, and regaling us ‘new students’ with wonderfully amusing stories, even though ‘orientation’ was the issue of the day. However, Charles’s stories were far more memorable than any ordinary question and answer ‘orientation’ could ever have been, and offered up ‘orientation’ in another way. Ultimately, it made all of Charles’s advisees feel right at home in our new unfamiliar place. That calming, order-providing gift, as we explored unfamiliar terrain — I came to learn — was one that Charles gave repeatedly to his many friends, ranging from the intellectual and artistic to the sybaritic.

When I came to Connecticut College I had wanted to become an Art Historian. Charles was my first teacher in the subject, with Ancient Art. All of Charles’s classes were a delight, from Chinese Art to one considering late 19th century ‘decadence’ movements in seminar. Charles was the only teacher I ever had who pointed to our right slide with his right hand, and our left slide with his left hand, ending up criss-crossed and amused, while we scribbled away at our notes and laughed along with him. Charles made the material fascinating, and he got to the essence of what the art movements were about, which made for an enduring understanding and love for the subject. I took eight courses with him, went abroad when Charles went on sabbatical, and like some others, developed a strong taste for British Art under his care — Pre-Raphaelitism, William Morris and 19th century Gothic being highlights.

While at college, one of the best events was a surprise visit to Charles’s house. Was it April Fool’s day, or Charles’s birthday? In any case, we students all dressed up in costumes drawn from our course with Charles. Rachel Carley was Yang Kwei Fe (an infamous concubine), Hatsy Tuttle was wrapped in toilet paper as a mummy, and she was borne by Rob

Donaldson and myself on crossed arms — like a litter. There were more of us — I cannot remember them all. Well, Charles let us in and we had cocktails and laughed for hours. Rachel had a very loud laugh too. It was a fabulous evening. A year or two later, when we were graduating, Charles also made all of us a truly delicious roast beef dinner at his apartment, another great evening of much fun and hearty laughter.

After I left college, I made regular pilgrimages to 'Barf Acres' — Charles's acronym for his wonderful summer home in Harrington, Maine. It gave Greek Revival new meaning and richness for me — living as we did closer to the amenity levels of its 19th century constructors than our own 'posh' era. Dealing with the wood stove or the electric rings, pump priming, or hoping Maureen McCabe would wake in time for the outing and then that her makeup would come off in water which may not have been warm enough (stove troubles), or the baths in the local lake, or the quiet read in the 3 holer (no flush) Connoisseur Magazine provided; it was all deeply memorable. Joyce Burgess, his next door neighbor, grew raspberries for us in huge abundance, baked blueberry buckle pies, and provided us with all the stories of local life we could ever need. Charles was also a huge fan of picnics — which in Maine under his care were a fabulous experience. Preparations always included French cookbooks or an Alice B. Toklas chocolate recipe, a wicker basket, endless chatter about artists or locals or art movements or ... a cocktail of one sort or another, and then in the A.M. a relaxed panic to complete the finishing touches. Then, where to go? With miles of fabulous coastline and picturesque harbors, wherever we went with Charles was great, and it was always memorable good fun. Two weeks could pass in no time, and you wanted to stay all summer. I just kept coming back. The house decayed quietly in the background, but Charles and his lucky guests never cared. It was three miles for butter, eight miles for cream, the same for gin, or veg. Really we were a kind of Swedish hunter-gatherer clan — armed with Volvos or Saabs for transport. However, with 18/19th century townscapes to gawp at, or acres of blueberries, or Tonk mountain to gaze at, who cared how long it took or where we went. Not me.

Charles was an utterly unique and marvelous character. Brilliant, gentle, wise, insightful, amusing, outrageous, artistically talented, a mentor and friend to so many people. He will be sorely missed and shall remain unforgettable — etched like drypoint burr on our minds.

“C.S. LEWIS, CHARLES PRICE, AND THE LITERATURE OF CHILDHOOD”

Brian Rogers

Retired Special Collections Librarian

Within the wide compass of his worldly and spiritual interests Charles was erudition itself, although he carried that erudition lightly. For we all know that with Charles erudition walked hand in hand with the humorous, even from time to time with the absurd. He taught us to laugh at the absurdities of the world because oftentimes that is all we can do.

Perhaps this was one reason that his knowledge of British and American art and architecture, or French painting, or literature, cohabited unashamedly with his love of children’s literature: the classic writings for young people by Kenneth Grahame or E. B. White, the illustrations of Ernest Shepard or Edward Ardizzone, the miniature masterpieces of Beatrix Potter, or Eric Carle’s inimitable fusions of art and story for the very young.

Charles demonstrated this love in a public way several years ago when he curated an exhibition of art for children’s literature at the Lyman Allyn, a show called “This Wondrous World.” For Charles — and perhaps for a number of us — the wondrous world of art and literature for young people could be as invigorating as any number of adult intellectual preoccupations, and more satisfying than many.

I should like to read some lines from another person of immense erudition who shared this love, this admiration: I refer to C. S. Lewis, the Oxford don now perhaps more famous for the *Chronicles of Narnia* than for his learned discourses on literature and Christianity. These excerpts are from Lewis’s essay entitled “On Three Ways of Writing for Children,” an apologia he was prompted to set down following the international success of the Narnia stories.

“I never met *The Wind in the Willows* ... till I was in my late twenties, and I do not think I have enjoyed [it] any less on that account. I

am almost inclined to set it up as a canon that a children's story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story."

Then the author of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and close friend of J.R.R. Tolkien, goes on to say: "This canon seems to me most obviously true of that particular type of children's story which is dearest to my own taste, the fantasy or fairy tale [A] man who admits that dwarfs and giants and talking beasts and witches are still dear to him in his fifty-third year is now less likely to be praised for his perennial youth than scorned and pitied for arrested development."

"When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found out doing so. Now that I am fifty I read them openly. When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up."

"I hope everyone has read Tolkien's essay on Fairy Tales, which is perhaps the most important contribution to the subject that anyone has yet made. If so, you will know already that in most places and times, the fairy tale has not been specially made for, nor exclusively enjoyed by, children."

"Consider Mr. Badger in *The Wind in the Willows* — that extraordinary amalgam of high rank, coarse manners, gruffness, shyness, and goodness. The child who has once met Mr. Badger has ever afterwards, in its bones, a knowledge of humanity ... which it could not get in any other way."

"I now like hock, which I am sure I should not have liked as a child. But I still like lemon-squash. I call this growth ... because I have been enriched: where I formerly had only one pleasure, I now have two ... I now enjoy Tolstoy and Jane Austen and Trollope as well as fairy tales and I call that growth ... I now enjoy the fairy tales better than I did in childhood: being now able to put more in, of course I get more out."

C. S. Lewis described Kenneth Grahame's Mr. Badger as "an extraordinary amalgam of high rank, coarse manners, gruffness, shyness, and goodness." Substitute "humor" for "coarse manners" and we have a deft description of Charles.

Good-bye, dear Badger: We shall always hold you happily in our memory, just as we remember the classic stories we first heard when we were very young.

“TO HOLD THE WHOLE OF US TOGETHER IN HIS LOVE”

Cynthia Willauer, '72, '79

My tribute to Charles is as beloved teacher, friend and spiritual mentor. It's Trinitarian.

Charles was my teacher in the late 1960's, early 70's. I had come to the campus in marrying faculty, and given my need for education was part of the fledgling Return to College program. One of the first courses I enrolled in was an evening seminar of Charles's. He wrote in the margins of the papers that I submitted to him comments such as “so what?” and “ugh.” Why did I not take this as a signal I was hopelessly out of my depth? Why do I remember his comments like these with affection? It was because Charles, even as he was critical, was not condemning. He had a huge capacity to hold together all that we are, hold together our not impressive and our impressive and all that lies between them and in his love for us make us whole. This is a quality of Charles's I seek to make mine in the ways I relate to others.

Another quality of his I seek to make mine is that he taught presence to life. As a teacher he taught this as presence to art. Be in relation with what you see. Really see it. Feel it. Delight in it.

I learned this in a wonderful way one spring vacation in 1969. My husband George and I were in London on a sabbatical leave when Charles arrived with a Connecticut College study group assembled to view paintings. By then I was working with him on an independent study, so by virtue of this role was welcomed into the group. I remember Charles's method with awe. He would bring us to the door of a museum, make a few inquiries, then track down a painting he wanted us to see, looking neither to left nor to right. When we came before the painting, I expected he would tell us what it was he wanted us to see. Rather than do this, he would simply stand before it as before a beloved friend, utterly happy to be in its presence. We absorbed his ability to be present to what he loved, to see to the best of our ability what he saw

in what he loved. His delight made disciples of us.

My student relationship with Charles grew into a relationship of family friendship, probably as a result of our time together in London. I've wondered, in fact, whether Charles didn't influence George's and my daughter *in utero*. She was with our group unborn as we went about museums, and then she was very nearly born in Birmingham when George and I tried to see a Burne-Jones exhibit Charles said was a must. True, she might be the way she is because she grew to know and love Charles on her own terms — Charles related to children with his inimitable delight. But who or what would inspire a child at age eight to give a parent for Christmas an alphabet poster of the Gashleycrumb Tinies illustrated by Edward Gorey. For those of you who don't know the work, it is drawings of tiny children with names from A to Z meeting their death in grisly ways. I attribute our daughter's taste for the macabre to Charles and I treasure it from A to Z. A is for Amy, who fell down the stairs; Z is for Zillian who drank too much gin.

Charles used to say the only bad thing about being a teacher was the students. "Students," he would say, "Ugh!" Yet who believed him?

A disapproval that I do believe he harbored was that of a woman becoming a minister. "A woman minister, no!" A minister in the United Church of Christ, "a thousand times "no!" Yet he was with me spiritually in ways that go far beyond words as I traveled the path of becoming a minister. And disapproving as he was of women serving the ministry, he came to services I was invited to lead in the Pequot Chapel in New London and afterwards he pulled together lunch parties to celebrate.

This is so Charles, isn't it! To hold the whole of us together in his love. To be critical, but not condemning. To delight in us, just as we are.

Dear Charles, know the fullness of our delight in you!

“LIKE HAVING A PERSONAL ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA”

Maureen McCabe

Joanne Toor Cummings '50 Professor of Art

The last time I was in Harkness Chapel was with Charles for the Charles Shain Memorial Service. We were singing “Bye Bye Blackbird.” Charles leaned over and whispered to me: “We won’t be singing that at *my* memorial.” At the Library reception afterward I said: “Charles, I can’t speak at your memorial. I will be too upset.” He replied: “Ishkabbible. Yes, you can.”

I first met Charles in 1971. I had just come to Connecticut College as a member of the art department. As required for new faculty, there was an exhibition of my work in the Fanny Wetmore Gallery. My artwork at the time was very Victorian with lots of “fru fru.” Charles introduced himself stating that the 19th century was his favorite. Our friendship had begun.

Actually we didn’t become close friends for a while because the entire half of their corridor (meaning art history) was always filled with smoke (I am allergic to smoke). Charles smoked little cigars, Edgar Mayhew chain smoked, and John Knowlton smoked a pipe. After a few years the corridor cleared of smoke (with the exception of Edgar of course) and we began to spend time together, going to exhibitions and talking endlessly about art. We even went to Ireland one summer. Charles became my friend of whom I could ask anything. He always seemed to know the answer (and he was accurate, too). It was like having a personal *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. I learned so much from him.

As the decades went on I met a lot of Charles’s friends. He seemed to be continuously accumulating new ones (and of all ages and types). He was the resident uncle for several families: the Merrills, for example, who all called him Uncle Chucky. With their next generation it changed to Uncle Chunky. With the Smith family his name was

Dorpsche, since *Wind in the Willows* was one of his favorite books. As a result of this, Charles always had several choices of where to spend the holidays. Thanksgiving was at the Kollers, Christmas and Easter at the Merrills. Charles developed an extensive birthday card list — with all the months represented. If you were on his list you received a card yearly — some people were sent cards for over 55 years. The list included 97 names, with 17 noted as deceased with a cross. But there were no lines drawn through any of the names. Charles was a loyal friend. Of course, all of these friends made it possible for Charles to stretch out the celebration of his own birthday for days if not weeks — he always had at least 3 and sometimes as many as 6 parties.

Charles and I occasionally co-hosted birthday parties. One we did was for our friend Barbara Zabel. It was to feature lobster bisque with lobster tails (Charles was an excellent cook: his favorite cooking, naturally, was French). I bought a dozen lobster tails and as we were putting them into the bisque Charles counted only 11 of them (I had eaten one). Charles refused to pay for the eaten one. Charles was frugal.

Back to the cards. In recent years, if someone did not receive his or her birthday card my phone would start ringing. As most of you know Charles did not have a telephone for years. Thank God his Episcopalian friends installed one as a birthday present. This meant we didn't have to go out in rain and snow to deliver messages. Charles had quite a support system. His neighbors Michael and Pamela Bagwell looked after him. Michael and I have visited Charles during his various bouts of illness on just about every floor of Lawrence and Memorial Hospital. Last October, people started calling when they hadn't gotten their card from Charles. Was Charles ill? Yes, I said, he drove and checked himself into the hospital. At first it seemed like another go round but after Halloween it became clear that it was the final go round. As Charles said, "finally my doctors are listening to me — since I'm dying." So I got on the "blower" and started calling his friends. Not a day went by when he didn't have visitors. At times you had to wait your turn to see him. Charles asked me to call his girlfriend Maude. Charles and Maude were art students at the Boston Museum School in the 1940s. Maude told me they would walk around Boston holding hands, reciting poetry to each other. She came down from New Hampshire — they had a great three-hour conversa-

tion. When leaving, Maude bent over and kissed Charles on the lips. Charles said “At last.”

Which brings me to two concluding remarks. One is from Charles. On a postcard dated June 15, 1998 he wrote the following:

“All my best art work is on postcards. When I returned from Paris in 1964 my fellow graduate students had mounted an exhibition of postcards from Paris in the Yale Art Library. When I am gone (sob!) you can do an exhibition in Shain Library, that is, if you can locate all the cards done between 1955 and the END.”

Well, we have put together a small exhibition in the Library that you can see today — and no I didn’t find all of the cards.

Lastly, I once said to Charles: “What will I do when you’re gone? I will never be able to find another friend like you.” His reply: “Quite right, Maureen. Quite right.”



“A PRICE ABOVE RUBIES”

PROVERBS 31,10

John H.B. Knowlton
Professor Emeritus of Art History

Whenever I think of Charles — as so often I still do — there comes quite unbidden to my mind's eye Max Beerbohm's caricature of Henry James: a very large rounded figure kneeling on one knee before a closed door, his eye to the keyhole. But in my image there is nothing of Beerbohm's malice, nor of James's morbid inquisitiveness. No, what Charlie is peeping into is a world of tiny wonders, a child's world, richly furnished by the creative mind of an adult nourished by long years in the study of art, the art of many lands and many centuries, that came to its most intense focus on Pre-Raphaelite England and particularly upon the art of Edward Burne-Jones and the circle of William Morris.

It was, possibly, this imaginative reach into other small worlds that made him so devoted and influential a teacher — and here arises another pop-up image: Charles seen through the doorway of his little office, looming across his desk toward a student on the other side, usually wearing a look of happy incredulity. Few teachers, I think, at any time, have so successfully crossed the generational barrier.

He lived, as he often assured me, inside a self-created persona with an assumed Back Bay accent and writing a stylized fine Italian hand that might have graced a manuscript for the Aldine Press. Armed with a ceaseless flow of contrarian, ironic, paradoxical humor, he sought to keep reality at bay, and protect his own vision of a world populated by the wild creatures of Maurice Sendak and the sinister Victorian gentlefolk of Edward Gorey. In the service of this vision he continued his teaching after retirement with a succession of beautiful displays in our library of the work of printmakers and book illustrators, again the most intimate of artistic media, the practice of which had in fact been his own original professional intention before, happily, he wandered into teaching art history. A student once asked him if all art history profes-

sors had been artists. “Oh no,” he replied in his melancholy way, “only the good ones.”

The last time I saw Charles, shortly before his death, in a room at the Beechwood Manor, filled with a half-dozen or so of old friends, he was still a very large presence. He lay with his hands folded over an ample stomach, evidently conscious but with his eyes closed and a very gentle smile on his lips, seemingly confident that this time he would pass through that keyhole and be recognized and welcomed on the other side.

