

Final draft proofed.

1

C.R.C.A. Allberry and C.P. Snow's "Roy Calvert"

In a recent review in this journal¹, Professor S.N. Lieu had occasion to mention the outstanding Orientalist C.R.C.A. Allberry, who having deciphered and edited the Coptic Manichaean Psalm-book of the Medinet Madi finds met a premature death as a navigator in Bomber Command in 1943. Lieu adds in parenthesis to Allberry's name, "the role-model for Roy Calvert in C.P. Snow's novel *The Light and the Dark*". This note is written to draw out and correct the nuances of this description, which repeats something often said, something which has given deep offence to some and caused pain and distress to others. In doing so, I imply no particular criticism of Professor Lieu. His note has served to trigger my composition of a note which I have long thought needs to be written, in the light of the full evidence which is now to hand. Lieu has but repeated as many have done before, implications of the book itself. These were underlined by the novelist's brother Philip Snow in his biographical sketch *Stranger and Brother*², to which is appended an index of C.P. Snow's characters and their putative models amongst his acquaintances and contemporaries. In that index the identification is explicitly made, with no specific qualification.

Perhaps it is necessary for those who have not read Snow's work or this particular novel to outline the character of Calvert as found there. He is a brilliant scholar of a Cambridge college (a thinly disguised Christ's), who having gained high honours in Classics is guided by the Master of the College into Oriental studies, beginning with Syriac. He then proceeds to become one of the foundation researchers upon newly discovered Manichaean material in Sogdian, dazzling British and German scholars alike by his prodigious aptitude. He is elected Fellow. He is gifted with charm and wit, much given to teasing, often affectionate but sometimes directed with more destructive intent against the pompous and self-important. He is a sympathetic friend, very dear to Lewis Eliot, the "hero" of this series of novels (which are written in an autobiographical style, and which, indeed, have a strong element of Snow's autobiography in them).

Three traits stand out in the delineation of this character. He yearns for the certainty of religious faith, but cannot find it. He is also afflicted with an ineluctable despair, in the throes of which he indulges in frantic bouts of heavy drinking. His escape from these periods of depression often takes an extravagant near self-destructive form. For example, shortly after his election as Fellow, he is beset by depression and self-loathing. He breaks out from this in public expression by ironic innuendo, of his suspicion that a famous scholar's reputation is based upon a plagiaristic appropriation of a deceased co-researcher's life work. Such depressive despair already had him secretly in its grip even before he came up to Cambridge. It is suicidal distress thus created in him as the burden grows heavier, which leads him to leave the safety of an intelligence post into which national service has drawn him and to volunteer as R.A.F. air-crew. This is in all a coherent picture, but the third trait is startling and unexpected. His charm is felt by many women and he leads a life of promiscuity. Some of his relationships are transient and brief, others

¹ J.Th.S. n.s. Vol.48 (1997) pg. 232 para.3.

² *Stranger and Brother. A portrait of C.P. Snow* by Philip Snow. London, 1982.

last over years and hold deep significance for him as well as for his mistresses. When, already in the R.A.F., he eventually marries, his bride is a woman who has been his mistress for a number of years. Since he is also depicted as very wealthy, it would not be an exaggeration to describe her as having an eye for the main chance. She sticks to him over the years prior to marriage, turning a very thick skin against his occasional periods of "unfaithfulness", and the opposition of various of his friends to her evident intent to secure him as her husband.

Such a description, and the ostensible identification of the character as a scholar known to have been a close friend of the novelist, have been misleading in respect of the life and personality of Allberry. Some would even accuse the novelist of libellous defamation. When first I read the book, early in my acquaintance with Snow's work, this characterization did not appear to me implausible or incoherent. The novelist might however have been accused of "over-egging the pudding". Although the explicit reference to Manichaeism and recently discovered manuscripts made a link with Allberry inevitable once that one knew that field, I did not at that time make the assumption that it was intended to be a portrait of that scholar. It may be the case that at the date when first I encountered *The Light and the Dark*, about 1952, I did not know of Allberry's work. But in the next few years, I read more widely in the Manichaeism field, and at the end of that decade was well aware of his work, and of the identification of this scholar of reality with Snow's "fictional" but plausible character.

The problems implicit for some of an older generation were brought to light for me first by a conversation with G.D.Kilpatrick. While I was talking to him in an informal setting, the subject of novels came up in which Snow's name was mentioned by me, as an author whom I read with interest. At this, Kilpatrick spoke with some anger, declaring that Snow had maligned both a friend and the widow of that friend in the characters of Calvert and the woman he marries. This brought home to me with full force what the characterization must have meant to some of Allberry's friends and to his family³.

Some years later I gained greater insight into Allberry's character and the impression he made, not only upon his friends, colleagues and spiritual guides, but also upon the woman who in fact married him, giving birth to his son after her husband had been lost in action. This came through the memoir which his widow (Mrs. Patricia Lewis) published privately in 1984. One effect of this book was to deepen my perception of the anguish which Snow's characterization could cause to those close to Allberry. The preface gives poignancy to the matter of reputation and of character about which this note treats. Mrs. Lewis records that her son David, rereading *The Light and the Dark*, enquired of his mother, "Was my father really like that?". She decided to compose an answer for him from her own recollections,

³ I have since learned that my earlier mentor, Robert Casey, was also acquainted with Allberry, but during his lifetime no occasion ever arose to talk about the man or his work or the alleged modelling upon him of Snow's character "Calvert". His comments, as from one known to have been a wise confessor and also a practising psycho-analyst, would surely have been illuminating.

and those of surviving friends with whom she was in touch. I learnt of this book⁴ from an article in *Theology*⁵, and Mrs. Lewis was so kind as to make me a gift of her memoir. My further remarks about her late husband (save for one personal note) are derived from what is there published.

The three traits which are listed above, and which have given cause for distress to his family and friends are dealt with in the following manner, both in Mrs. Lewis's own recollection and in the excerpts from the letters of numerous friends and acquaintances of whom she had enquired. Amongst these were Prof. Dr. Alexander Böhlig, Professor Emeritus Thomas Burrow, the Revd. Fr. Kenelm Foster O.P., Professor F.H. Hinsley, Mr. Dennis Holmes, M.B.E., the Very Revd. Canon Bernard Lovelady (who had received Allberry into the Catholic Church), Mr. C. Morris (Fellow of King's College, Cambridge), the Revd. C.E. Moxley, Professor Sir John Plumb, (at that time Master of Christ's College, Cambridge), Mr. S. Gorley Putt (Fellow of Christ's College), Mr. E.W. Swanton, and Mr. Patrick Wilkinson (Fellow of King's College, Cambridge). There are also included, by permission, a number of excerpts from Philip Snow's memoir of his brother, previously mentioned, and most interestingly, the testimonials addressed to Mr. S.W. Grose, Vice-Master of Christ's College, Cambridge, during the consideration of Allberry's proposed election to a Fellowship.

Allberry was an Anglican churchman on the Anglo-Catholic wing of the church. He held, in addition to an Open Scholarship at Christ's, a Tancred Scholarship awarded to intending ordinands of the Church of England. In his student days and the years of his fellowship, he passed through a period of questioning, eventually giving up the Tancred Scholarship when he decided that he had no vocation. None of his friends seems to have observed these questionings to be traumatic in effect. Those amongst them who later proceeded to orders, Anglican or Roman Catholic, consider in the light of their recollections and their later pastoral experience that the problems were no more than a normal phase for a young believer to pass through. Behind these questionings, which are not spelled out by any informant, may have lain some dissatisfaction with the Anglican tradition, since Allberry was at length received into the Roman Catholic Church in his days in the R.A.F. At that time, he took the additional name of Augustine.

On the question of depression, reports differ. Some acquaintances claim never to have noticed any such. C.P. Snow himself, on the other hand, speaks of this in a private letter to his brother, who also knew Allberry, as a major problem which their friend had to confront. This is indeed so with the fictional character of Calvert. His depressive periods are hidden from casual or everyday acquaintance and known only to close friends. There seems to be no doubt that Snow bases his description of the devastation of Lewis Eliot at Calvert's death on his own grief

⁴ Patricia K.G. Lewis, *Charles Allberry, a Portrait* (E.E. Plumridge, 1984) privately published. I am grateful to the staff of the Cambridge University Library, who helped me to track down this book.

⁵ *Theology* vol.90 (1987) pp. 193-199. Sarvar Khambatta. "Snow's The Light and the Dark: Calvert and the Manichaeian Heresy". My attention was drawn to this by Mrs. Sue Pegg, a former student, and graduate of Birmingham University, to whom I am grateful for the information.

when Allberry was killed. There is equally no reason to consider that in his private correspondence he spoke other than the truth as he and his brother perceived it.

In contradistinction to the support given by his friends to the picture of intellectual and psychological struggle as part of Allberry's character, we find that those who deal with the question of sexual morality, appear to suggest with equal clarity that in this respect Snow grafted onto his vivid recollections of his friend, traits which were foreign to his nature and behaviour. Sir John Plumb, former Master of Christ's and a younger contemporary of Snow and Allberry at the college, writes in his contribution to the memoir, "He was certainly not a womanizer. As far as I know, until Pat came along, he had never taken a girl seriously or even unseriously for that matter.⁶ In the matter of love as of politics, he was inexperienced. With hindsight, I think that one can see that Charles was searching for a system of belief, a pattern of personal living to which he could totally commit himself". " by the end of 1941, the search was over both personally and ideologically. He knew he was a great scholar, he had found God and a Church, a wife to love and a cause to commit himself to. I believe that the last year of Charles's life was the happiest he had ever known".⁷

Sir John also suggests, in a communication quoted by Mrs. Lewis in the preface to the memoir, that "Snow never intended Roy Calvert to be a totally life-like portrait of Charles. Indeed, he was very much indebted to one of the major characters in *"The Razor's Edge"* by Somerset Maugham" (identified by Khambatta as "Larry Darrell"). In such a note as this, with a quite specific objective, we cannot write at length of Snow's practices as creator of fictional characters over the breadth of his published novels. If I were to write such a study, it would express the view that Snow went too far in his use of known persons as models for the general outline of his characters, both in repetition of actual events, and in the grafting-on of characteristics foreign to the putative models. It would also seem that he was, so far as published records go, unconcerned about the impact of these aspects of his writing once that the models were perceived and identifications made.

A salient example may suffice, namely the figure of Jago, in the three novels *The Light and the Dark*, *The Masters*, and *The Affair*. The character is identified as built upon the model of Charles Raven, ornithologist and theologian, Regius Professor of Divinity, Master of Christ's, Vice-Chancellor of the University. Whatever personal traits may be common to the two, there are features amazing in respect of such a model. Firstly, almost all Cambridge dons in Snow's books, at least those who are fellows of "the college" have (as they say) a "great future behind them". Jago, Senior Tutor, is no exception. His life as a scholar has been unproductive apart from an early study of New England prose writers. Moreover, apart from his volatility of temperament, and flaring irascibility, this is one of the main objections to him as future Master of the college in the novel *The Masters*, which deals with the election of a head. But the second feature is far more serious if a living subject were the model, for it is the portrait of Jago's wife. She is childless,

⁶ In the first (two) sentences of this excerpt, I have changed the punctuation from a comma after "womanizer", to a full stop, as the sense seemed to require.

⁷ see P. Lewis, op.cit.(footnote 3), pp.29,30.

unattractive, tactless and hysterical, and a major burden upon him, as even his supporters are driven to admit. Her character with all its weaknesses is used in a vicious pamphlet campaign as a major objection to Jago as Master. This could as readily have been taken as in fact a slur upon the wife of the scholar in question. It may well have been. Philip Snow records that his brother felt himself “not welcome at Christ’s following the appearance of *The Masters*” and acknowledges that he was “*persona non grata* amongst certain fellows”. Philip Snow also notes that “Christ’s at last made him an Honorary Fellow”, a form of words which probably reveals in its suggestion of an unmerited delay of the honour, the effect of the disapproval earlier referred to.⁸

As I have suggested, one could multiply a discussion along these lines, for instance in the case of the character George Passant, found in a number of novels, modelled on H.E.Howard, Senior History Master at Alderman Newton’s School, Leicester, where Snow (and Plumb and I) were educated. The seamier side of Howard’s nature Snow does indeed highlight in the character of Passant. But in making him a solicitor, not a schoolmaster, Snow robs himself of the opportunity of displaying the man’s gifts of teaching and of awakening his pupils’ awareness of the vistas of achievement which life could hold for them. For those who know other corridors stalked by Snow in his time, the list might well be lengthy. Not only are personalities and institutions belittled by implication, but also the city of Leicester. As a native of that city, I have often winced at remarks which I felt to be unnecessarily derogatory since it had a generous educational policy. To that, good schools and libraries and a civic museum testify, while I feel that others than I could make mention of official acts of encouragement and financial generosity.

To return to the case in point, that of Allberry. I have rehearsed evidence, largely from Mrs.Lewis’s memoir and the words of its contributors. This shows certainly that the picture of Calvert of a philanderer bears no relation to the knowledge and understanding of Allberry retained by his widow and his friends. In their recollection of the brilliant Coptologist, they retained the image of an erudite and amusing young man, a devout Christian, who volunteered beyond the call of duty and gave his life in the patriotic cause. Spiritual searching there certainly was, but it issued not in arid hopelessness, but in certainty. He would have died assured of the gospel. In all probability (as I am told in the light of chaplaincy practice during active service) he would have been been to confession and received the Blessed Sacrament before undertaking his last mission. About depression, the reports vary. It is clear that C.P.Snow was deeply concerned for his friend, consistently writing of Allberry’s unhappiness. Yet others do not seem to have been much struck by any such problem as Snow thought was dominant in Allberry. Close friends, and Allberry’s wife, use no such terminology about the one they loved and recollect. In any case, whatever may have been the reaction in the 1940s, we should not today, I believe, be inclined to place a moral weight upon what would have been a clinically definable condition if Allberry had been technically “depressive”.

In conclusion I would suggest that we might reflect on the significance of the fact that Allberry took the additional name of “Augustine” on his reception into the

⁸ *op.cit.* pp.104 & 175, cp.pg.160

Catholic church . While that holds a certain ambiguity, and will not entirely resolve every conflict of evidence for us, it may assure us that he had experienced at the end, not only forgiveness of sins, but also resolution of his intellectual and spiritual quest, coming to know the truth of the saint's words, " You have made for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in You".⁹

I am of a later generation than that of Snow and Allberry. I was still a child when they were elected to their fellowships. I did not know Allberry. My first study of Manichaeism as an adult was in Burkitt's "The Religion of the Manichees". It was but later that I came to the work of Polotsky, Allberry and Böhlig on the Medinet Madi manuscripts, which Burkitt did not know. Thus I treasure a book which reveals a bond between Allberry and Burkitt. A feature peculiar to that copy casts a small light upon the warm and outgoing friendliness of Allberry, a trait on which all those here discussed are agreed. It is a book which is now on my shelves. I found it years ago casually lying amongst others on varied subjects in Galloway and Porters. It is a hardbound copy of "A Manichaeian Psalm-book Part II (Stuttgart, 1938) edited by C.R.C.Allberry, M.A., Lady Wallis Budge Fellow, Christ's College, Cambridge" . All printed copies of that edition have the dedication "In memory of F.C.Burkitt". The copy in my possession also bears the hand-written inscription, dated 11. 2. 40, "To A.Persis Burkitt, the gift of Charles Allberry, in memory of one who cared for the Manichees". This sheds for me some positive light on Allberry's character, firstly on his relationship to those who preceded him in the field he made so brilliantly his own : Mrs.Lewis has commented to me in a private letter that "Charles was very fond of the Burkitts". In the second place, it reveals a scholar of evident and moving empathy with those whose writings his learning had brought back from the past.

J.Neville Birdsall

⁹ St.Augustine. Confessions i (1) (translation of H.Chadwick. pg.3)