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Abstract

R.B. McCallum of Pembroke College, Oxford, wrote on political history and was a frequent attendee of Inklings sessions.

Additional Keywords

McCallum, R.B. (Ronald)

R. B. McCallum: The Master Inkleling

David Bratman

TWO great Inklelings were born in the year 1898, C. S. Lewis and Owen Barfield. But a third Inkleling was also born that year: R. B. McCallum, on August 28, 1898, in Paisley, Scotland, where the fabric comes from—his father was a master dyer in the textile industry. He died May 18, 1973. Like most of the Inklelings, McCallum was an Oxford University academic, but with a difference: he taught and wrote on history and politics, and during the group's last years he was Master, the elected head, of his college—a position the likes of which no other Inkleling ever achieved or even aspired to. So what was a Scottish social scientist with canny political ambitions doing in a group of unworldly English literary men? The answer takes us back to 1925, when J. R. R. Tolkien was elected Oxford's Professor of Anglo-Saxon.

Most Oxford dons are Fellows of their individual colleges, elected by the other Fellows they will be sharing quarters with, and chosen not just for their academic attainments but for that quality aptly called collegiality. But professors, of whom there are relatively few, are chosen by special committees consisting mostly of other professors. Because they must have rooms to work in and social facilities to meet other dons in, they then get wished on to colleges which may have had little say in their election. Tolkien found himself attached to Pembroke College: perhaps the most out of the way, obscure, and poorest, and definitely the smallest college in all of Oxford. In three hundred years of existence it had had hardly any distinguished graduates, and its faculty consisted of a Master, five regular Fellows, and Tolkien. By contrast, that same year C. S. Lewis was elected to Magdalen College, which had over thirty Fellows.

Tolkien hated Pembroke. He called it a miserable, unfriendly place, and wanted nothing more than to shake its dust off his feet (*Letters* 108). He had little in common with the other dons, whom he thought anti-Catholic (*Letters* 84) and liable to over-indulge in the college port (McCallum, "Pembroke" 15). But he did make one friend there: the youngest don, also newly elected, with the same given name as himself, Ronald McCallum.

Most Scots desiring book-learning go to one of Scotland's excellent universities, but McCallum had attended Oxford and read history, after service in World War I. Then he had spent a year in graduate work at Princeton, making him perhaps the first Inkleling to visit America, and taught at Glasgow University near home, before being elected to his fellowship.

Tolkien found McCallum a congenial soul, but although the Inklelings began meeting in the 1930s it was not until after World War II that McCallum was to be seen among them. His appearance there may have been for two reasons: as the meetings went on, their original purpose as occasions to share literary compositions faded to the back of the picture, and good conversation became their main purpose; and they became, to an extent, popular and well-known. During the Thirties nobody had known about the Inklelings group but themselves, but during and after the war they began gathering at their favorite pub, the "Bird and Baby," and it was hard to miss them. Humphrey Carpenter writes of those who to an extent elected themselves as Inklelings (*Inklelings* 186). They went to the pub sessions, which were relatively open, and angled for the opportunity to attend "real" Inklelings meetings, the Thursday nights in Lewis's rooms at Magdalen. McCallum was evidently one of these. Perhaps he was looking for more outlets for the serious conversation he loved; perhaps he was trying, as he did in other venues, to test his own social status in the university by seeing if the Inklelings would accept him.

The evidence as to whether they did or not is decidedly mixed. McCallum's advent was possibly the result of Tolkien's tendency to bring along guests or prospective members without asking first if they would be welcome. When McCallum did not show up for a while in 1948, W. H. Lewis said "we all thought [he] had tacitly resigned," and were disappointed when it later proved he had not (*Brothers* 218). Later, Lewis, though still describing McCallum's conversation as "ponderous" (Diary, Nov. 22, 1949), paid him this backhanded compliment: "He much improves as time goes on, and if one gets the impression in listening to him that you are having a tutorial, well I suppose a history don cannot very well talk history in any other way" (*Brothers* 225). This is accepting, but grudgingly so, and since Tolkien had some lengthy absences from the group during this period, when, John Wain writes, "One of the founding members introduced a notorious bore into the circle and then stayed away on the grounds that the meetings were boring" (185), one may well wonder whom he might be referring to. It is said that McCallum's "portly figure dominated any gathering he attended" (Pelczynski 525), and that may have been as true of the Inklelings as of any other. Tolkien's view of

McCallum's role in the Inklings might be hidden in his description of Alexander Cameron of the Notion Club, a Scottish historian of whom it is said, "No one remembers his being invited to join the Club, or knows why he comes, but he appears from time to time" (*Sauron* 160).

Although the Inklings' regular Thursday meetings died out in 1949, the pub meetings continued actively, and McCallum was often present, despite all his other responsibilities. Surely, one thinks, McCallum would not have continued attending all those years if he did not feel welcome; yet he may have been oblivious to any dislike. McCallum must have felt some loyalty to the Inklings as an entity, because after C. S. Lewis died in 1963 he attempted to continue the meetings. But evidently nobody else wanted to attend sessions at which McCallum rather than Lewis was the central figure, and he quickly accepted the situation, grandly ringing the curtain down on the group with the pronouncement, "When the Sun goes out there is no more light in the solar system" (Hooper 703). Naturally, he attended Walter Hooper's annual "Friends of C. S. Lewis" parties.

The Inklings were not the only Oxford institution McCallum felt loyal to, and in fact loyalty and dedication seem to have been among his strongest positive characteristics. Another institution that claimed his attention was the *Oxford Magazine*, a small-circulation journal aimed exclusively at an audience of dons. Lewis, Tolkien, and their fellow Inkling Nevill Coghill submitted many poems and articles to it in the 1930s. McCallum wrote for it also, and continued to do so for the rest of his career—mostly amusing vignettes of university life, often under pseudonyms such as Vernon Fork, which he had plucked at random from a gazetteer of Indiana. He also served three separate terms as editor, and several times stood in as emergency editor. Not once but twice when publication sputtered to a halt for financial reasons, McCallum stepped in to reorganize the magazine's financial basis and resume publication. The last time he did this, also serving as editor, was all the more remarkable as he was 73, had been retired from Oxford for several years, and had just returned to the city after spending the intervening time presiding over a think tank near London (*Oxford Magazine* Editorial Comments; Levens 31).

His primary loyalty, however, was to his college and the university. From the junior fellowship at Pembroke, he rose in seniority until he became the senior tutor, and by the early 1950s he was essentially running the college in place of an elderly invalid Master. When the Master finally died in 1955, it was only natural

for McCallum, then 57, to succeed him, the first Master in Pembroke's entire history not to be a clergyman. He held the position for twelve years until his own retirement.

The 1950s and 1960s were a period of tremendous growth for Oxford. Many new dons and students had to be attached to the older colleges. Even Pembroke took its share: by the time of McCallum's retirement it had over 25 Fellows. Most of the posts were added during his tenure, and included the first scientists ever to teach at Pembroke. McCallum combined a loyalty to Oxford's traditional style with an enthusiasm for newly expanded educational opportunities, a determination to improve academic standards, and a keenness to raise the money needed to do these things. He supervised the college's physical expansion, parsimoniously converting a neighboring street of old houses into a new quadrangle rather than tearing them down and building an ugly modernist cube in their place. The Inklings must have approved of that aesthetic sensitivity at least.

McCallum's attempts to put Pembroke on the Oxford social map began long before his election as Master, and included a project to invite distinguished figures from other colleges to dine with the Fellows. It may say as much about Pembroke as about McCallum himself that his first several choices all declined, one of them even saying "that he didn't want to dine with [him] on this Tuesday, *or on any other night*," but saying it in what seemed to McCallum as "such a charming manner as robbed it of all offense." Was McCallum oblivious to the fact that some people did not care for his company? W. H. Lewis shook his head when he heard about it: "A queer fish, Mac, as I said before" (Diary, Nov. 22, 1949).

Not to be stopped with running his college, during those years McCallum also served as assistant vice-chancellor and as the university's representative on the Oxford City Council, an institution other dons in general wanted nothing to do with. He seems to have had an appetite for administration, and to have been fairly good at it, for all that he might have been clumsy or irritating. His colleagues must have thought well enough of his abilities to elect him Master. In short, he was a don's don, with both the positives and negatives of the breed, and what most differentiated him from others was his tolerance of points of view other than his own. This broad-mindedness was useful when tutoring political science students, and it may also have been why he was the only don of his administrative stature who really had time for the Inklings.

For it must be remembered that, although outsiders today think of the Inklings as the quintessential Oxford figures, they were regarded as rather odd by most of Oxford academic society in their time. They were considered fuzzy-headed men

with a disdain for progress and no interest in endless committee meetings. They wrote lowbrow popular religious books and strange tales about dwarves and hobbits. And the Inklings returned the feeling about the university establishment, calling them bland self-important men who did not love the subjects they taught and who felt there was something more real about a factory than a field. McCallum did not share all the establishment feelings—he had, for instance, read and enjoyed *The Hobbit*, if only, perhaps, because it was the work of a Fellow of Pembroke—but he did have the establishment personality and style. So it is not surprising that, while the Oxford hierarchy found him useful and even likable, the odd dons, the outsiders, often did not. Hugh Trevor-Roper, the Regius Professor of History, a popularizing writer who had been foisted on an unwilling university, once called McCallum “a sanctimonious Scottish ass.” When the two squared off as campaign managers in the Chancellorship election of 1960, Trevor-Roper proved himself the superior politician. His man beat McCallum’s man by a clear majority (Horne 2.270-71).

Reading McCallum’s academic writings may help one understand why Trevor-Roper thought him sanctimonious. McCallum was a competent historian in a traditional mode, not a researcher but an analyzer, specializing in explaining the basis for public opinions. He wrote five full-length books, three of them directly on that subject. The most influential of these, *The British General Election of 1945*, co-authored with a graduate student named Alison Readman, was the pioneering work of psephology, the academic study of elections (a field McCallum named), and founded a series of studies that continues today. Researching an election while it is still going on is a commonplace idea now, but McCallum thought of it first (Kavanagh 4). Another book, *Public Opinion and the Last Peace*, written during World War II, challenged Maynard Keynes’s widely-accepted opinion on the Treaty of Versailles: that it was a mistake and that the League of Nations had been doomed to collapse. McCallum, bravely or foolishly, argued that the failure was the result of a blinkered and manipulated public opinion, and pleaded for a new and sounder League after the present war. Opinion may have been moving in his direction, because the United Nations fit his specifications. His most unusual book was also written in the midst of the war, and published in French under the title *Les années de separation*. Addressed to French exiles, Canadians, and colonials (metropolitan France was still under German occupation and inaccessible when he wrote), it sought to justify to the French British attitudes during the early years of war. It was also published in English so that the British could learn what McCallum was

saying to their allies. “Sanctimonious” may be the best word to describe McCallum’s patient and rather condescending over-explanations of British customs and attitudes, a tone present in much of his non-specialist writing for the general public. (It is evident, for instance, in his elementary pamphlet *How Britain is Governed*.) The reader of McCallum’s books may be struck by their non-technical clarity and their easy and sure command of facts, the signs of a scholar who knows his field, but also by a certain windiness—not the same as verbosity—and the sense, more than with many academic treatises, that one can hear the author lecturing at you.

McCallum’s pieces on university life for the *Oxford Magazine*, though similarly windy, are delightfully relaxed and witty, because he was writing for an audience of his peers. Some of his best pieces are gentle ribbings of university customs, ceremonies, and traditions in the form of pastiches of writers such as Ernest Bramah and J. M. Synge. He even ribs himself. In one article he discusses the university’s official list of graduate students and their thesis topics. “It is a formidable document,” he writes, “and I wonder if other dons have the experience which has come to me of reading some rather clumsy statement of a subject, in the recognized jargon [. . .] and thinking ‘what extraordinary things people do,’ and then reading on under ‘Supervisor’ and finding your own name” (“Work” 35).

McCallum’s two other books concern the history of the Liberal Party: a brief biography of its late leader H. H. Asquith, and an intellectual history of the party, the latter a refreshing extension of scholarly rigor in a field where most histories are purely electoral. McCallum was an active member of the party, which itself is significant. In his youth and for the generation before, under Gladstone, Asquith, and Lloyd George, the Liberal Party had been a mighty, progressive force in Britain, but by his adulthood it had faded and was on its way to becoming a minor party. Whether in power or out of it, the Liberals of the time were the party of paternalistic reform, in which the upper and middle classes, moved often by nonconformist religious fervor, decided what was best for the poor and gave it to them. It was the perfect party for a severe Scottish Presbyterian like McCallum. Gunn shows that McCallum stuck with them in their decline, as he stuck with other obscure institutions like Pembroke and the Inklings. In his last years he moved, like some other Liberals, to the political right, becoming cranky in the face of student and anti-Vietnam War protest (431).

Besides writing scholarly works, dons tutor undergraduates. McCallum did well at this, taking an interest in the student mind, working with his pupils

straightforwardly, and inspiring neither the devotion nor the bewilderment that C. S. Lewis did. McCallum's pupils connect him to circles far removed from what one normally associates with the Inklings. Most aspiring British politicians—seven of the last ten Prime Ministers, for instance—attend Oxford, and most of the aspiring politicians at Oxford read a course called Modern Greats, which consists of three subjects: Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. As a prominent tutor in politics, McCallum was in regular demand, even among students not from Pembroke whose own colleges lacked politics dons. Some of his students went on to distinguished careers. In the late 1930s, Morgan writes, McCallum tutored a studious young man named Harold Wilson, and helped him look for a job in journalism before Wilson decided to become an economist (36, 47-48). Later, Wilson went into Labour Party politics, and became Prime Minister in the 1960s and 1970s. In the early 1950s McCallum tutored Michael Heseltine, a prominent Conservative politician of the 1980s and 1990s. But Heseltine was a careless student, more interested in shining in debates at the Oxford Union than in getting high grades (Critchley 3-4, 9-11). McCallum's favorite student, and one of his very first, was an American Rhodes Scholar from Arkansas called Bill Fulbright. Later, J. William Fulbright became a U.S. Senator, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and a mentor to the young Bill Clinton. For nearly fifty years, Fulbright and McCallum stayed in touch, writing letters that are now in the Fulbright archives, passing on advice on one side and current American political news on the other, discussing international affairs and courteously disagreeing about the Vietnam War (Gunn 419-33). Fulbright himself attributed the impulse behind his international education program, the Fulbright scholarships, to his internationalist political education at the hands of McCallum (Fulbright 2).

In later years, Fulbright was known by his political enemies as Halfbright. One wonders if this jibe was in use in his Oxford days and if McCallum ever mentioned his pupil's name to his friend Tolkien, and if so whether the name might have inspired that of a character called Samwise, which means "half-wise." But that is pure speculation. There is surely much more that could be learned about R. B. McCallum and his role in the Inklings. A man both warmly loved and ardently disliked, a dry academic and a lively wit, a talented and worldly administrator and a social naïve, and a don out of place at the Inklings but devoted to them and liked by Tolkien, McCallum presents a personality whose common threads are particularly challenging to tease out.

Notes

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