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Cavalier Treatment: The Spellmaster of Caerleon

Abstract
Discusses the life and works of Arthur Machen, known for horror and fantasy.

Additional Keywords
Machen, Arthur; Bonnie GoodKnight
Cavaller Treatment

The Spellmaster of Caerleon

Lee Speth

In Beyond Life, James Branch Cabell growled (through his character John Charteris): "...But here in a secluded library is no place to speak of the thirty years' neglect that has been accorded Mr. Arthur Machen; it is the sort of crime that ought to be dealt with in the Biblical manner, from the house-top...."

No less are this Society and this magazine culpably involved in neglect of Mr. Arthur Machen - in a widespread critical heedlessness that has now outlived Machen himself and is close to being a century-long felony. It is, I suppose, proper to me as a longtime Machen collector to commence amends in these quarters.

A few books about Machen have appeared, and an essay slips into the scholarly journals as a curiosity now and then. But nothing to date in Mythlore. We deliver a solid body of work on Tolkien, Lewis and Williams, as is our objective; we speak often of Dorothy Sayers (who wrote no fantasy), a very little (too little) of Chesterton and somewhat more of George MacDonald, yet we neglect a remarkable fantasist, a British writer who articulated so many of the concerns of the Inklings before any such group had evolved at Oxford.

It was Machen who enunciated, in Hieroglyphics, a pugnaciously mythopoeic definition of literary excellence while Tolkien and Lewis were still at school. Machen whose fiction explored the glory of the Grail and the perverted sacraments of evil before Williams ever attempted his novels, and it was Arthur Machen who, with a mediocre patriotic story, spawned one of the actual supernatural myths of our century.

He was a Christian, a Welshman, a humane Tory, a quester and a dreamer. His literary talents were unsuited to commercial success, and poverty regarded sometimes with pain, sometimes with rueful humor, is a recurring theme in his autobiography. He acted on the stage and drudged on the newspapers. Mrs. Cecil Chesterton, recollecting El Vino, a journalist's tavern in Fleet Street that flourished before World War I (and endures, by the way), remembered hearing "Abbé Dimnet, who had a unique knowledge of vintage claret, while Arthur Machen, his scholarly face alight, would discourse on demonology."

Indeed, demonology. Machen largely survives today in the anthologies of horror stories. "The Red God Pan," "The Inmost Light," "The White People" or "The Shining Pyramid" can be counted on to be in print somewhere. This unhallowed talent has its admirers and its critics; their associations with the occult Society of the Golden Dawn were at different periods.

Machen was born at Caerleon-on-Usk in the land of Gwent in Wales, a region steeped in Arthurian lore.

"And the man was come like a shadow from the shadow of Druid trees, where Usk with mighty murmurings goes out to ghostly seas."

Chesterton thus invoked the Celtic chieftain Colan in The Ballad of the White Horse, but he could have had Arthur Machen in mind. After a false start in the persona of a cosmopolitan Londoner, Machen gave himself over fully to a preoccupation with his rural Welsh memories; Gwent is the home soil of his imagination. He drew on its landscapes and sense of antiquity and its exoticism in his stories that fulfilled before World War I (and endures, by the way), remembered hearing "Abbé Dimnet, who had a unique knowledge of vintage claret, while Arthur Machen, his scholarly face alight, would discourse on demonology."

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His interest in the occult was lifelong; A. E. Waite was a close friend. It could never secure his final allegiance however, both his abiding rationality and his sense of humor opposed its

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But "The Lord of the Rings" could not be laid in any setting other than Middle-earth. It is intimately and inextricably related to its setting. Thus the creation of a convincing setting in which the events to be narrated will take place may be seen to be a basic act in the art of writing fantasy.

The creation of an accurate visual representation of the fantasy setting may thus be a considerable aid in the understanding and enjoyment of a fantasy tale. That this is so can immediately be seen in the enormous impact Tolkien's maps had on his readers. I can recall my first contact with the trilogy, and avidly following the printed narrative and the maps at the same time. I can also recall my initial disappointment with other works in the fantasy field which did not have maps.

It would be useful, then, to have available reasonably accurate maps of many fantasy settings. Post's Atlas is an admirable start toward that goal. But his is a collection of reprints, and as such prints only what is available and of course does nothing to correct any faults or inaccuracies which might be in the originals. (And many of the maps had nothing to do with the literature of fantasy as it has been discussed here.)

We should aim, therefore, at the compilation of new maps of fantasy tales where sufficient detail exists to draw them and for which good maps are not now available. These should conform as exactly as possible to the authors' texts.

There would be no need in this to tackle Tolkien; his own maps are definitive. There is little need to go over Narnia again; despite a few details which do not seem to conform to the text, the Pauline Baynes map may be regarded as covering that field. But many remain. I have worked in several of them and hope to present the results of that work in a series of short article/map combinations.

These items may represent some departure from the main objects of the interest of the Mythopoeic Society. But I hope they may be excused in that they explore a fundamental aspect of fantasy in general: how the lands lay.

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primacy. His testing came with the death of his first wife. Machen has recounted this remarkable episode in *Things Near and Far*:

"... The utmost that I had hoped from my experiment was a temporary dulling of the consciousness. The image received was not merely dull lack of painful sensation, but a peace of the spirit that was quite ineffable, a knowledge that all hurts and doles and wounds were healed, that that which was broken was reunited." Machen's conclusion may seem startling. "This is all wonderful," I suppose that it is, but let me observe firmly that I consider an act of kindness to a wretched mangy kitten to be much more important."

It is one of the most striking statements of spiritual priority I have ever read; "powers" and even transcendent euphoria are discerned as subordinate to the scheme of earthly life, and Machen, for all his spells and alchemy, for all his sporting with supernal horrors, puts himself firmly on the side of elemental good. The Christian sets the occultist firmly aside and never seems to have regretted the decision.

(To be continued)

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NOTES

Mae govannen, foreign friends!

The Princes, Knights, Dames and Commons of Forodrim, The Tolkien Society of Stockholm, greet you! Wandering minstrels have sung great songs of your deeds and doings, and therefore we have the pleasure to invite you to our Tolkien Feast, coinciding with our 9th Year Jubilee, on the 27th-30th of May in the Year of Our Lord 1981.

The Celebration will begin with a Tolkien exhibition in our House of Culture, including a lecture and a debate, singing and dancing. It will continue with a massive banquet. We also plan to organize a Carnival, a Picnic and visits to places of historical interest around Stockholm.

At the moment we cannot tell the exact costs of the banquet, nor the minor details of the Feast itself. What we can tell is that: a) It will take place, b) You are invited!

We would appreciate a reply before the end of this year. New and full information about the Tolkien Feast will be sent out to anyone interested well in advance of the great event.

Namarië tenn omentielvo! THE GRAND COUNCIL OF FORODRIM

Send all replies and enquiries to Martin Sturait, Essinge­ringen 13, S-112 64 Stockholm, SWEDEN. Accommodation with members of our Society can be arranged, please inform us of your needs.

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