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## Cavalier Treatment: The Spellmaster of Caerleon

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## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-52.htm>

### Abstract

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

### Additional Keywords

Machen, Arthur; Bonnie GoodKnight

# CAVALIER 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 discussed 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 drugged on the newspapers. Mrs. Cecil Chesterton, recollecting El Vino, a journalists' 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 Great God Pan," "The Inmost Light," "The White People" or "The Shining Pyramid" can be counted on to be in print somewhere. This unhallowed talent is the cornerstone of his fame; Edward Wagenknecht calls him the Laureate of Evil, the *Reader's Encyclopedia* defines him as "Preoccupied with black magic and the horrors of the supernatural."

Well, he did write the stories but one familiar with the wider scope of his work must find this emphasis unfair. His earliest books, *The Anatomy of Tobacco* and *The Chronicle of Clemency*, are costume drollery, pastiche of medieval and renaissance styles. Carl Van Vechten called *The Hill of Dreams* "the most beautiful book in the world" while Dr. Stiggins, on the other hand, is a remarkably sustained invective against the Protes-

tant mentality and Manchester economics, gleeful in its hatred. Machen's autobiography in two volumes, *Far Off Things* and *Things Near and Far*, must act upon anyone who loves the English language, and with the Grail stories *The Secret Glory* and *The Great Return* we move into the realms of the numinous and the transformational.

"Ambrose was thirsty, and then he saw that beside the tree there was a well, half-hidden by the arching roots that rose above it. The water was still and shining, as though it were a mirror of black marble, and marking the brim was a great stone on which were cut the letters:

FONS VITAE IMMORTALIS

"He rose and, bending over the well, put down his lips to drink, and his soul and body were filled as with a flood of joy. Now he knew that all his days of exile he had borne with pain and grief a heavy, weary body. There had been dolours in every limb and achings in every bone; his feet had dragged upon the ground, slowly, wearily, as the feet of those who go in chains. But dim, broken spectres, miserable shapes and crooked images of the world had his eyes seen; for they were eyes bleared with sickness, darkened by the approach of death. Now, indeed, he clearly beheld the shining vision of things immortal. He drank great draughts of the dark, glittering waters, drinking, it seemed, the light; and he was filled with life."

So much for the "Laureate of Evil."

Born in 1863 and dying in 1947, Machen's long life overlapped that of Charles Williams at both ends. Williams alone of the Inklings was probably familiar with his work. It is not known that they met; 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  
Past Caerleon of the fallen kings  
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 and gratefully to a preoccupation with his rural Welsh memories; Gwent is the home soil of his imagination. He drew on its landscapes and sense of antique custom. He bore out of those hills both a hard sense of the actual and a deep impression of the mystery that suffuses things; he pictured among those hills the hiding places of the Little People - no household sprites, but flesh and blood, his dark, malignant Little People. And his God was always the God who had made Gwent.

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

(Continued on page 38)

But The Lord of the Rings could not be laid in any setting other than Middle-Earth. It is intimately and inextricably tied 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 for 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.

#### Cavalier Treatment — continued from page 36

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

"I was beside myself with dismay and torment; I could not endure my own being. And then a process suggested itself to me, as having the possibility of relief, and without crediting what I had heard of this process or indeed having any precise knowledge of it or of its results, I did what had to be done..." We are left to infer that he attempted a spell of sorts, remembered from his occult delvings; the result - unexpected he insists - was that "the wall trembled and the pictures on the wall shook and shivered before my eyes ... It is not quite just: trembled, dilated, became misty in their outlines; seemed on the point of disappearing altogether, and then shuddered and contracted back again into their proper form and solidity.... That day and for many days afterwards I was dissolved into bliss, into a sort of rapture of life which has no parallel that I can think of... touch became an exquisite and conscious pleasure; I could not so much as place my hand on the table before me without experiencing a thrill of delight...." The phenomena continued for days. A species of migraine that had plagued the author all his life vanished, never to return. The pavement beneath his feet took on a feel of resiliency - a "delicious" effect, Machen assures us. "Great gusts of incense were blown in those days into my nostrils, odours of rare gums seemed to fume before invisible altars in Holborn...."

"... The utmost that I had hoped from my experiment was a temporary dulling of the consciousness ... what I received was not mere 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 here say firmly that I consider an act of kindness to a wretched mangy kitten to be much more important."

It is one the most striking statements of spiritual priority I have ever read; "powers" and even transcendent euphoria are discerned as subordinate in 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 set 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.

Namarie tenn omentielvo! THE GRAND COUNCIL OF FORODRIM

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

MYTHPRINT, the Society's monthly newsletter, is \$4 for 12 issues. Write to Box 28427, San Jose, CA. 95159. Make checks payable to the Society. Primarily contains Discussion Group information, plus news announcements and reviews.

