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## Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

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### Hugo Dyson: An Update (Note)

**Abstract**

Updates Bratman's 1997 essay on Inking Dyson in *Mythlore* #82.

**Additional Keywords**

Dyson, Hugo—Biography; Inklings—History—1939-1945

# N OTES AND LETTERS

## HUGO DYSON: AN UPDATE

DAVID BRATMAN

WHEN I WROTE A BIOGRAPHICAL ARTICLE ON HUGO DYSON on the occasion of the centenary of his birth (“Hugo Dyson: Inkling, Teacher, *Bon Vivant*,” published in *Mythlore*, vol. 21, no. 4 [#82, Winter 1997]), my primary interest was in addressing the paradoxes of Dyson’s membership in and relationship to the Inklings. But I also covered other areas of his career for which I had access to source materials: his two decades as a don at Reading University, a topic omitted from other studies of the Inklings; his scholarship; his teaching at Oxford; and his late-blooming career on television and even in the movies.

I have retained my interest in Dyson, and in the twenty years since the article was published I have accumulated enough corrections and amplifications to make a brief supplement on the most important ones worthwhile.

### 1. HIS FAMILY AND BACKGROUND

I had little information on this. I wrote, “Henry Victor Dyson Dyson was born on Tuesday, April 7, 1896, in Hove, Sussex, the son of Philip and Henrietta Dyson” (Bratman 19). His parentage came from his *Times* obituary, the only source for this that I had. However, Jared Lobdell has performed genealogical research that shows Dyson’s origins to be more interesting and complex than this. Dyson was his mother’s birth name. His father was born Philippe Tannenbaum (1866-1939) in Bresko in the Galicia region of Austria (now Brzesko, Poland) (Lobdell 4, 6). He only took his wife’s surname, by deed poll, in 1904, and presumably his children’s names were changed at that time as well (Lobdell 5, 8). This would also explain why “Dyson” repeats in our subject’s name. Originally it was just a middle name, as mothers’ names are often used, and then repeated when it became his surname as well (Lobdell 1-2, 5).

Lobdell concludes that Dyson was probably born in London, and spent his early years in Uxbridge, Middlesex (now part of Greater London), where Henrietta Dyson’s family home was located. The family lived there until about 1905, and they apparently moved to Sussex at that time (Lobdell 4, 6-8).

Lobdell also has a theory as to the origin of Dyson’s nickname Hugo, on which I did not speculate. This suggestion is that it derives from the middle

name Victor, which would have enabled him, or schoolfellows, to allude to the French author Victor Hugo (Lobdell 1-2). This is possible, but I would lend it more credence if the name Victor were rarer in Britain at the time than it was.

## 2. HIS MEETING WITH TOLKIEN

Like others, I took this account from an interview with Nevill Coghill, who related that as Secretary of the Exeter College Essay Club in 1920, he invited Tolkien to read a paper at a meeting at which Dyson was also present (Bratman 20). However, research by Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond into the records of the Essay Club has since revealed that Coghill held no office in the club and must have misremembered the circumstances (1:786-87).

## 3. HIS REVIEWS

In discussing Dyson's book *Augustans and Romantics, 1689-1830* (1940), I quoted from an "anonymous reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement*—clearly a friend of Dyson's since he is referred to as 'Hugo,' a name he never put in print" (Bratman 22-23). The since-released author index to the anonymously-published reviews in the *Times Literary Supplement* (contained within *Times*) reveals that this reviewer was B. Ifor Evans (1899-1982), author himself of *A Short History of English Literature* (1940), then professor of English at Queen Mary College, London, and later Provost of University College, London. The opportunity for professional connections between him and Dyson is obvious, but I have no information on any specific contact or friendship between them.

## 4. HIS STUDENTS

I cited Anne Righter (Barton) and Alun R. Jones as two pupils of Dyson who acknowledged his inspiration and help in their books (Bratman 23) and A. Alvarez and Jonathan Kozol as two "who found themselves dissatisfied with Oxford educations which included stints as pupils of Dyson's" (33n10), but the only account I had of Dyson's eccentric behavior as a tutor or research advisor was that of P.J. Kavanagh (Bratman 31), which had been earlier cited by Humphrey Carpenter. I regretted that time pressure prevented me from writing to Alvarez or Kozol to ask for their recollections, but Alvarez has since published his.

In his memoirs, Alvarez tells of working on a D.Phil. on metaphysical poetry at Oxford in the early 1950s. He writes, "My supervisor was Hugo Dyson, a jolly don with a limp, at Merton College, next door to Corpus. I saw him just once. He gave me sherry, told me, between gales of laughter, that he knew nothing at all about 'Metaphysical pottery' (more laughter), and suggested I went to the resident expert, Helen Gardner" (135). She refused to look at

Alvarez's work either, and he gave up, eventually folding his research into a treatise on *The School of Donne*.<sup>1</sup>

Another since-published account of Dyson as an impossibly difficult supervisor comes from the later Oxford professor John Carey, who testifies that "I always found him alarming. He was like a hyperactive gnome, and stumped around on a walking stick which, when he was seized by one of his paroxysms of laughter, he would beat up and down as if trying to drive it through the floor. It brought to mind Rumpelstiltskin driving his leg into the ground in the fairy tale. [...] On a good day he was the funniest man I ever met. [...] [H]e was an old-style don who did not really believe in literary 'research'. Literature was for enjoyment and it was misguided to turn it into something arcane and scholarly. That was a common view in Oxford at the time" (135-36).

Jared Lobdell has found a video interview by Alan Macfarlane with George Steiner (Lobdell 28), previously unknown to me, in which Steiner describes working on a D.Phil. at Oxford in 1949-50 on English Romantic drama. His experience with Dyson as a supervisor paralleled that of Alvarez. As Steiner tells it, Dyson said to him, "I'm not the slightest bit interested in research, which is an American-German invention, but I'm an honest man. [...] The fee is eight guineas a term for my supervision of you. I'm not going to supervise you, but we will go and spend it, either at a good dinner at the Bear in Woodstock or at a play in London. Every penny will be spent on us two having a good and instructive evening. Just don't ask me to read your bloody nonsense." Steiner assures the interviewer, "This is a completely true story" (Macfarlane, pt. 1, 00:31:20-58)<sup>2</sup>

As a result, Steiner says, he failed his viva because the same Helen Gardner, who conducted it, found him lacking in knowledge of textual scholarship and the use of sources. Later, Steiner received remedial supervision from Humphry House, who found his previous lack of it to be "a grave dereliction" (Macfarlane, pt. 1, 00:35:00-05). Steiner's second viva, also with Gardner, was successful.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Curiously, Alvarez thanks Gardner in his acknowledgments in *The School of Donne*, but not, unsurprisingly, Dyson (9).

<sup>2</sup> This and other quotations from this source are my transcriptions from the video-recorded interview. The text file attached to it that is labeled a transcript is actually a summary.

<sup>3</sup> Curiously, Steiner says nothing about Dyson in his written memoirs, though he tells the part of the story involving House in full, including the statement that House took Steiner on because his thesis "had received no proper supervision," without any specific attribution of the source of that defect (144).

## 5. HIS FILM CAREER

I described Dyson's brief appearance as an actor in the 1965 feature film *Darling* (Bratman 32-33). In his interview, George Steiner says that Dyson's one scene was filmed in "his magnificent rooms at Merton" (Macfarlane, pt. 1, 00:31:15-18), the same rooms, as I'd noted, that Tolkien had hoped to get when he was installed as a don at Merton at the same time as Dyson (Bratman 27-28).

I should also mention that then-unpublished letters by C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams that I quoted from have since appeared in print in collections of their correspondence.

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**DAVID BRATMAN** is co-editor of *Tolkien Studies: An Annual Scholarly Review* and has written the annual "Year's Work in Tolkien Studies" for that publication. His other writings include the article on authors contemporary with Tolkien for *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien* edited by Stuart D. Lee (Wiley Blackwell, 2014) and the bibliographical appendix on the Inklings to *The Company They Keep* by Diana Pavlac Glyer (Kent State, 2007). His work on Tolkien and the Inklings has also appeared in *Mythlore*.