

Three Letters from Stanley Casson to Francis Henry Taylor, 1932

New College Library has recently purchased a book written by Stanley Casson (1889-1944), Reader in Classical Archaeology, and Fellow of New College. This volume was acquired with three typed letters tucked inside it, from Casson to the American museum curator Francis Henry Taylor (1903-57), and written in the interwar years. Presumably the book therefore once belonged to Taylor or a member of his family, and these letters were lodged in it as a suitable resting place.¹

Casson was a remarkable figure, as a moving obituary by John L. Myers, also sometime of New College, amply attests.² Casson was a man of action as well as a scholar: as Myers wrote of Casson in Salonica (Thessaloniki) in the Great War,

Here adventure was linked with antiquity at every turn; Paeonia's own peonies in no-man's-land; Amphipolis and Philippi; the great Roman milestone inscribed **KAISARI GERMANIKWI** which so pleased our men; the neolithic strata in the sides of the trenches; an Intelligence mess like a College Common Room, with learned colleagues, too, among the French and the Serbs. It was all in the picture that the officer detailed to escort the Bulgar flag of truce should become an Honorary Member of the Bulgarian Archaeological Institute. And then, to be one of the first Allied officers to enter Constantinople; one of the farthest on that fantastic front in Turkestan, astride a single railway track in sand-desert; to be mentioned in despatches, and receive the Greek Order of the Saviour – what better credentials for an Assistant Director of the British School – Dean, Tutor, and Librarian in one – or for a Fellow of New College with a roving commission in archaeology, coupled with light duty as a lecturer in the Department at the Ashmolean.

Casson's academic career in Oxford after the war was distinguished, and he was a sociable presence in Oxford, living with his wife and daughter in New College Lane, and entertaining the young. He was a dedicated Hellene, spoke Modern Greek fluently, and made sure that many of his pupils visited the Greek lands for themselves in the decades between the wars. War had not finished with Casson himself, however, and he saw active service again in the Second World War. In it he 'found a soldier's end', killed in an airplane crash in Greece.

In 1932, the year of the letters printed below, Casson was a settled academic. In 1926 he had published his major academic work, *Macedonia, Thrace and Illyria: their relations to Greece from the earliest times down to the time of Philip son of Amyntas*. He served as a Proctor in 1928, also the year of his influential *Some Modern Sculptors*, the book we have just acquired with the letters to Taylor; this

¹ Stanley Casson, *Some Modern Sculptors* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), acquired with three enclosed typed letters from Joslin Hall Rare Books, Northampton, Mass., from catalogue *BOOKIN'!*, new series no. 5 (19 November 2013), item 19.

² Information from the obituary of Casson by John L. Myers in *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 41 (1940-45), pp. 1-4; and see [Stanley Casson], *Bibliography Lieut.-Colonel Stanley Casson, (Intelligence Corps.) M.A., F.S.A., Hon.A.R.I.B.A.* ([London]: [The Authors' Club], [1945?]), Bodleian shelfmark 258732 e. 5. Casson wrote an autobiography of his experiences in the Great War: *Steady Drummer* (London: Bell, 1935). In Oxford, there are some papers of Casson, including six letters to Stanley Casson from the sculptor Charles D'Orville 'Pilk' Pilkington Jackson (various dated, 1933-36) held in the Beasley Archive, The Classical Art Research Centre, University of Oxford. There are further letters among the papers of H. A. L. Fisher, Warden of New College, now held in the Bodleian, Fisher MSS, in Fisher MSS 44, 152, 216.

was followed in 1930 by his *XXth Century Sculptors*. There was a great deal more to come in the 1930s and early '40s, including some more general, expansive works, notably *Progress and Catastrophe: An Anatomy of Human Adventure* (1937), and *Greece and Britain* (1943).

In 1931, Casson came across an article in the journal *Parnassus* entitled 'The Archaic Smile', written by Francis Henry Taylor, former Curator of Medieval Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Director of the Worcester Art Museum at about the time of these letters; he eventually became Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Casson was impressed by the article, and so wrote to its author to tell him so. This first letter, sent before the two men had met, is rather formal in tone, as one might expect. Here it is in full:

Francis Henry Taylor Esq

Feb 13

Dear Sir

I should like to write to say how very much I appreciated a small article of yours in 'Parnassus' called "The archaic smile". I have been a close student of Greek sculpture for some twenty years and find an instant sympathy with all your views on Greek art and mediaeval art, and indeed your views on art as a whole.

I should be glad to hear if and when you write anything else of the kind. Archaic Greek art is quite certainly the only period of Greek art that has full integrity and a complete lack of self-consciousness. Indeed the very term archaic, like the term Primitive when used of early Italian art, is a misnomer, for it suggests a climax of perfection that was to come later.

Yours sincerely

Stanley Casson

In the intervening months between this and the next letter, the two men met – and very much enjoyed one another's company. Casson went to London, and drink was taken:

Aug 7th

My dear Taylor

I imagine that by now you are home again. I enjoyed that evening in London more than I have enjoyed anything in this country for a very long time. My only sorrow is that I cannot yet give the return party to you here. But that can wait.

How precisely I got home after you had decanted me from the taxi I cannot say. By strange luck I got into the right train and there remained semi-comatose until Oxford. Again Heaven aided and there was actually a taxi at the station. So in the end I got to bed.

All of which was the more pleasant an experience since, to be candid, I had envisaged you as ascetic, earnest up to a point, but definitely so engrossed in art as to despise the flesh.

Well, we live and learn, but it is not often that things turn out so vastly superior to what we had thought they were.

Meantime I suggest a good line of research would be to find out whether Miss Richter keeps a cast of Hermes in her bedroom.³ I believe that Pygmalion is not infrequent among archaeologists.

³ This is presumably the classical archaeologist and art historian Gisela Richter (1882-1972).

By the way the man Wilenski has just written a crazy book on “Modern Sculpture”⁴ that I find would serve as an admirable whipping post for discussing the ultra-modern coprolite-sculptors. (forgive this mixture of metaphors)

Eric Gill, by the way, whom I saw the Sunday after our carouse, is commissioned to do some 150 full size figures on a new cathedral at Guildford in Surrey. He is getting together a band and going to do it in the real mediaeval manner (I mean as regards the organisation.)

Meanwhile my best wishes to you as well as to your charming friend (whose capacity at the bottle was out of all relation to his size, if he will forgive me for this compliment!)

Alas only that we cannot meet for so long a time.

Yours ever

Stanley Casson

Forgive the typing, my handwriting is palsied and illegible

The letter shows Casson’s acquaintance with the sculptor, typographer, and printmaker Eric Gill (1882-1940), and Casson had indeed included a pioneering chapter on Gill in his *Some Modern Sculptors*, at a point when Gill was relatively early on in his career.⁵ Casson wrote well on Gill, and despite his admiration for Gill’s art he was impressed by neither Gill’s prose nor his piety. Not that Casson denied the influence of Gill’s acquired Roman Catholicity: but he considered it a negative influence, observing unflinchingly that ‘the religious basis of his art serves more as a limitation than an inspiration. His concentration upon religious subjects leads to a certain sterility of ideas’.⁶ Casson even warned his readers that Gill had sculpted ‘a certain number of definitely bad works’, which he identified and quarantined from further treatment. Yet the men must have got along in some fashion: with his third letter to Taylor below, Casson enclosed an original drawing by Gill as a gift. Gill was not slow to criticize Casson in turn: when he reviewed the latter’s study of the Primitive period unfavourably, Casson wrote back angrily to the sculptor: ‘I have just read your review !!xx!!xx It is bloody rude and no mistake. But almost every point you make is wrong’.⁷

The third and final letter from Casson to Taylor arrived some months later in 1932:

Nov 2 1932

My dear Taylor

What a man you are! I expected a couple of small prints of the two statues and instead I find a perfect gallery of superb pictures. I can only retaliate, as I do now, with a small original drawing by Eric Gill, which I hope you will like. Consider it as a memento of our admirable evening in London.

⁴ R. H. Wilenski, *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture: An essay on some original sculpture of the present day, together with some account of the methods of professional disseminators of the notion that certain sculptors in ancient Greece were the first and the last to achieve perfection in sculpture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932).

⁵ Fiona MacCarthy, *Eric Gill* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), p. 228.

⁶ *Some Modern Sculptors*, pp. 88, 92, 93.

⁷ Quoted in Malcolm Yorke, *Eric Gill: Man of Flesh and Spirit* (London: Constable, 1981), p. 244, from the original in the Albert Sperison Gill Collection, Gleeson Library, University of San Francisco.

I am so sorry you have had troubles and worries. But I knew I should hear from you in good time.

As to the statue, actually I see no reason to doubt it and it really is a scoop (I mean the Richter statue). But there will be a Hells own row in Greece and someone will get the permanent push in Athens. I simply cant imagine how on earth they get such things out without being spotted. The torso is a lovely thing and perfectly genuine. It is in fact the one I saw in London at Burneys. He sold it for £1200 I believe, so if it is offered to you see that that sum is not much exceeded – the cost of its cabin and a bit more interest is all that should be added. As art it is better than the Richter statue, but not a rarity of the same order.

I have a long paper on Anglo Saxon sculpture in the December and January Burlington, that may interest you. It is mainly an attempt to fix influences and dating and to send Maclagan⁸ to where he belongs for good.⁹

I regret still that I never got you to Oxford. But it must be done. We have that blighter Clapham now lecturing to us on Romanesque sculpture and I only wish you were doing it.¹⁰ There would be no difficulty in fixing it except that the pay would be mere birdseed. Anyhow next time you are over let me know and I will get going.

Meantime if in due course I can come over your way, as you suggest, I feel little doubt that I shall see U.S.A. a bit more from the right view-point than most of the mangy academics that sour the atmosphere of your genial land. Gawd, what stiffes we do send you sometimes!

Yours Stanley Casson

Enclosed also a bit of Yellow Journalism.¹¹

Gill himself carried out several commissions for the college: the Great War memorial of 1921, on the wall of the ante-chapel in New College, and which measures 27 x 4½ ft, containing 228 names, was designed by C. H. Holden and carved by Gill; and he then carved as a companion-piece the famous, if smaller, memorial to the fallen German nationals of the college, a college commission that caused outrage in some quarters at the time. The plaques in the Cloisters for the zoologist Gilbert Charles Bourne (1861-1933), the novelist and playwright John Galsworthy (1867-1933), and for Sir Henry Erle Richards (1862-1922), are all by Gill too.¹² The lettering for the plaque to Warden Spooner just inside the chapel door to the left looks like the work of at least Gill's workshop too. Was it Casson who enlisted Gill's skills for the college? The monument in New College to Casson himself cannot be by Gill, as he had died in 1940, but it is in his style. It stands

⁸ This is presumably the museum director Sir Eric Robert Dalrymple Maclagan (1879-1951), who was at this point Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

⁹ Stanley Casson, 'Byzantium and Anglo-Saxon Sculpture I', 'Byzantium and Anglo-Saxon Sculpture II', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 61, no. 357 (December, 1932), pp. 265-69, 272-74; vol. 62, no. 358 (January, 1933), pp. 26-27, 30-32, 34-36.

¹⁰ I.e. Sir Alfred William Clapham (1883-1950). In 1930 he had published *English Romanesque Architecture after the Conquest*; and in 1936 he followed it with *Romanesque Architecture in Western Europe*.

¹¹ This was an offprint of Casson's 'A Matter of Emphasis', *Greece & Rome* 11, no. 4 (1932).

¹² Sophie Huxley, *Eric Gill in Oxford* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 16-19. David Jones, who visited Gill while he was carving the War Memorial, painted some of the names.

today, a little too obscurely perhaps, outside the Founder's Library, halfway up the staircase in the south-east corner of the Old Quad. We trudge past it on the way up to college meetings.

William Poole
Fellow Librarian & Galsworthy Fellow