REMINISCENCES

THE DAY CAMELOT CAME

The last stop on T.H. White’s American Tour was at the college. The British author was quite impressed.

T he students of La Salle College (Christian Brothers) gave me for the last time I shall get it the stunning applause and affection which makes my heart turn over, and I am miserable that the tour is finished, and I don’t want to stop ever ever ever.

But for Terrence Hanway White—author of some two dozen books, half a dozen of them really good, and one a classic of twentieth-century English literature—the end was to come only one month after his last public appearance at La Salle. It was six years last December 16 since White’s visit to the college, and last January 17 marked the sixth anniversary of his death at age 57, aboard ship near Piraeus, Greece. The literary reputation of T. H. White (not to be confused with the other T. H. White who wrote The Making of the President volumes) seems secure, however, in his classic retelling of the Arthurian legend in Once and Future King, source of Walt Disney’s The Sword in the Stone and Alan Lerner’s Camelot.

The writer of the New York Times obituary for T. H. White observed that the author was a “modern exile in time longing for the past,” but such was his life and personality “that his beloved past might well have hanged him for a warlock.” As strange as his character is the improbable range of his writing from the first translation of a Latin Bestiary (where one could find, if indeed one ever wanted to, that the panther sleeps for three days after a good meal, awakening with a burp) to an account of the author’s training of a hawk by strict seventeenth-century methods.

Perhaps most improbably of all, but nevertheless true, is the genesis of the first part of The Once and Future King. White rented an English laborer’s cottage in the middle of a wood, and, together with two hedgehogs, six grass snakes, a stuffed phoenix, a bee hive, six pismires (a kind of ant), and the fourteenth edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, he set forth to retell for his century the stories of Arthur, Merlin, Lancelot, and Guinevere.

T. H. White moved to his last home on the small Channel Island of Alderney in 1948, announcing to the local inhabitants that he was a seventeen-time bigamist on the lam from London. Alderney is known chiefly for its low taxes and cheap liquor, both of which White seems to have enjoyed. In the last years of his life, he received some three thousand dollars a month in Camelot royalties and his Alderney house included studios for filming and painting, a swimming pool, and a Temple to the Emperor Hadrian (for architectural rather than religious purposes). Shortly before his death, White remarked that he “could count only seven happy years in all his life,” yet he believed Mankind to be “on the whole more decent than beastly.”

In the fall of 1963, White began a lecture tour of the United States, in order to, as he said, “distract the private unhappiness of old age, rather like knocking your head against a wall when you have the toothache.” His last book, the posthumously published America At Last: The American Journal of T. H. White records this delightful eccentric’s impressions of his travels, including his observations on Philadelphia and La Salle College.

Characteristically, the two things that most impressed T. H. White about Philadelphia were not those things usually considered to be the city’s “tourist attractions.” Instead, the Walt Whitman Bridge aroused White’s admiration and the North Philadelphia Station stirred his indignation. Of the bridge, White wrote:

There is a huge and graceful bridge named after Walt Whitman. Where is there a bridge in London named after Shakespeare himself? These people are more cultured than we.

As regards the North Philadelphia Station, White confirmed what perhaps many Philadelphians have suspected for some time:

So we stumbled bleary-eyed into bed and crawled out again reeling at 6 A.M., to catch the most miserable train in the world at the most miserable station (North Broad Street, Philadelphia, may it shortly fall to bits) . . . It was dirtier and more wretched than any London suburban station on a lost branch on strike. There was a strange, grimy iron fence down the middle of the tracks, presumably to prevent us from committing suicide . . . Oh God! Oh, Philadelphia!

T. H. White was scheduled to speak at La Salle on November 22, 1963, as part of the Centennial Weekend festivities. But during the hour on that day on which White was to speak, John Kennedy was assassinated, and the author himself lay very ill of mental and physical exhaustion in a New Orleans hospital. White and Kennedy had never met, but they were strangely linked. John Kennedy’s favorite song was “Camelot,” and the two men shared the same birthday. It was the second time that White’s writings had connected him with a dead leader—when King George VI of England died, White’s book, The Goshawk, was found on his bed.
TO LA SALLE

By James A. Butler, '68

Despite his illness, T. H. White rescheduled his appearance at La Salle and spoke on December 16. The writer had no particular admiration for anything Catholic (He once told two priests, “I had been prepared for baptism into the Catholic Church but had desisted at the last moment on discovering that I don’t believe a word of it”), but he was nevertheless evidently impressed by what he found at the college:

La Salle College is in its centennial year—it was founded on March 20, 1863. In 1940 its enrollment was about 400—it is now nearly 5,000. It has no Mediecan Grand Dukes (no millionaire benefactors) to support it, no benevolent cardinals to beg for it, and it is not state aided. By its own efforts alone and on a very low basic fee per resident student, approximately $1,600, it has built itself a $2 million Union Building in 1939 and a $2.5 million Science Center in 1960 and now it is after a new library for its centennial. I have been telling these boys all over the U.S. that they are living in the middle of a second cultural renaissance, and here it is with a vengeance.

Although my talk was during their dinner hour and they had to cut down on eating to attend it, enough students turned up to fill the college theatre with many standing at the back. And in this theatre—although there is no course in drama—they have themselves lately produced Death of a Salesman, Carousel, Anonymous Get Your Gun, Finian’s Rainbow, Fiorello, Bye, Bye, Birdie, Fantastics and, for I was speaking in front of the scenery, Gideon. It has had twelve lecturers since September 20th (and we are costly) while there have been ten concerts since October the 16th, including the Rittenhouse Opera Company in La Boheme. This doesn’t seem so to me to be bad going.

One of the tests which we have learned to apply to a virile college is to ask whether any of the students took the trouble to make that march on Washington last summer, protesting against segregation. Many from La Salle did . . . .

We admired the starched bands or jabots which the Brothers wear. They are called, we were told by the quiet voice of Brother Fidelian (Brother Burke), tabat. He also told us that one of my books had been read to them by the lector in the refectory of their house of studies, which made me feel pleased.

Whatever enthusiasm T. H. White felt for La Salle was more than returned by the audience’s feeling for him. After his lecture, White received a tremendous standing ovation—applause that was perhaps louder and longer because the speaker seemed so visibly ill. White spoke on “The Pleasures of Learning” and listed some of the things he had learned how to do in his fifty-seven years: shoot a bow and arrow, ride a horse, fly an airplane, sail a boat, deep-sea dive, paint pictures, build houses, read medieval Latin, write fair second-class novels, and produce hopeless poetry. He echoed a theme that often appears in his writings: The only thing I can find in life which seems to survive most of the disasters of living is learning about things.

Despite his physical sickness, T. H. White managed to brilliantly communicate what he considered to be the pleasures of learning: “The best thing for being said is to learn something. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting.”

As White’s comments upon learning suggest, his character had a serious aspect to balance his occasional delightful irreverence. Indeed, the central problem of The Once and Future King—and of Canterlot—is a moral issue of Might versus Right. Like his hero Arthur, White argues that morality is worth striving after and that the dominant force in human life should be justice rather than force. While his contemporaries were writing of the anti-hero and of moral anarchy, White chronicled the oldest English heroes and advocated the traditional virtues.

In his last public appearance at La Salle College, as in all his writings, T. H. White showed himself to be a disciple of that virtue which beloved medieval past called “humanity.”