

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

Casson was a remarkable figure, as a moving obituary by John L. Myers, also sometime of New College, amply attests.<sup>2</sup> 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

also the year of his influential *Some Modern Sculptors*, the book we have just acquired with the letters to Taylor; this 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.



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.

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 Maclagan<sup>8</sup> to where he belongs for good.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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 stiffs we do send you sometimes!

Yours Stanley Casson

Enclosed also a bit of Yellow Journalism.<sup>11</sup>

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

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<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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*.

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

John Galsworthy (1867-1933), and for Sir Henry Erle Richards (1862-1922), are all by Gill too.<sup>12</sup> 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 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

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<sup>12</sup> 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.