

Other memories occasioned by those on Tom Letchworth

Lionel Billows

In 1926 I rowed for my school, Monkton Combe, at Henley, and as our coach, Lucas, was a Christ's man, we fraternised with the Christ's crew, and I think we stayed in the same hotel in Wargrave, and Tom Letchworth became for me a more-than-life-sized hero. Christ's became, too, the only possible college for me to go to, disappointing my uncle, an Oxford man, who had offered to support my university career. I eventually arrived there in 1929, after a year's teaching in a prep school. Tom Letchworth still dominated the scene there, in a kind of heavenly abstraction.

My history supervisor was Anthony Steel, who became a good friend. I used to go to his house almost every Sunday to tea, and got to know his wife, Eileen and the -then-new-born baby. After a bit I started to call him Tony, as his wife did, but he corrected me gravely, saying that I should rather call him Anthony. The last episode with Eileen Steel, though I must have seen her again afterwards, was an altercation she had with Benjamin Britten at the Lucern Festival in 1947 or 8, when I was responsible for the British representation. I tried to soothe them both, without much success. She

had scolded him for wearing a jacket that didn't come up to her standards of representative appearance. He rejected her criticism with force. I tried to calm him down afterwards, saying I had known her for twenty years and owed a lot to her husband. He answered, still rather sharply: "Twenty minutes was more than enough for me."

Steel made one grave error, quite early, at my time at Christ's. He said I shouldn't work too hard, as I would certainly get a First anyway, whether I worked hard or not. Consequently, I devoted my time and energy primarily to rowing and also to helping with *The Gownsmen*. Later I thought that my coaching of boats had contributed significantly to my preparation for a career in teaching. Of course I got a Third. I asked Steel if I should do a further year or two, to get a better grade. He answered: "Oh no, in ten years' time you won't notice the difference." I used to see him whenever I was in Cambridge, and when he moved to Cardiff, as head of the University College, I used to go and stay with him there. He didn't quite get used to the Welsh, so he told Welsh jokes that caressed his dissociation from them in his mind. He tried to get them to give me a professorship on the basis of my work in Turkey, India and Uganda; but by that time it was too late; they said I was too old. So I settled down to a string of them in Germany.

I think I heard of Tom Letchworth's death, probably from the College Magazine, but not much about his career. He was certainly a more-than-life-sized hero of my youth. I have never been to Nigeria. I suppose if I had, I would have seen him or heard about him. I should have gone there some time in the sixties to lead a group of teachers for a month. But as no arrangements were to be made for preparing the teachers for the work, I refused to go. I'm sorry about it, but I felt that a firm protest against leaving matters to chance was called for.

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(Source unknown)