

III. Notes

Discovering T. C. Lethbridge

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My investigations into the life and times of Thomas Charles Lethbridge began in 2001 after a meeting with the author and rock musician Julian Cope. Cope initiated me into a musical collaboration that paid homage to T. C. Lethbridge and on September 11, 2001, 'The Sons of TC-Lethbridge' were born amongst the chaos of a day the world will never forget.

The objective of the collective was to produce a CD long-box set that included a 36-page booklet dedicated to Lethbridge's published work. During 2002 I set about re-reading all of his books with the objective of compiling an analytical table of contents for each of his works. Laborious though it was, the exercise aided me in writing the 'An Anthological Review of the Published Work of T. C. Lethbridge' that was to eventually appear in 'A Giant' (Aegir Recording Company Ltd., 2003). The first of the two CDs that accompanied the booklet contained rock music inspired by Lethbridge and the second disc featured a spoken word contribution by Colin Wilson set against an ambient backing of psychedelic musings. 'A Giant' was released in November 2003 and the work was performed live by our collective as part of Cope's three-day 'Rome Wasn't Burned in a Day' event at the Hammersmith Lyric, London.

After the release of 'A Giant' I began approaching literary agents with a view to seeking a publisher for Lethbridge's unpublished autobiography 'The Ivory Tower'. Many, including his wife Mina, had previously attempted to find a publisher for this assemblage, but unfortunately the work was not considered appealing enough for a commercial release. My own approach was to present the delightful autobiography, accompanied with a number of short essays that placed Lethbridge's reflections on his life at Cambridge into context. After receiving a number of rejection letters from literary agents, it was suggested to me that my efforts would be better placed if I attempted to write a formal biography that absorbed much of the information contained within 'The Ivory Tower', but contained a more comprehensive overview of his entire life's work.

After securing a literary agent for my new endeavour, I set about the task of writing and researching the Lethbridge biography. I took a year out from my vocation as a graphic designer to self-fund the research for the undertaking that was to be entitled 'T. C. Lethbridge – The Man Who Saw the Future'. During this early period of my investigation, Jonathan Rhys-Lewis, a consultant in paper conservation from Colchester, contacted me via 'The Sons of TC-Lethbridge' website. Jonathan's advice and wealth of knowledge were influential in kick-starting the direction of my research and his timely interventions continue to be invaluable and most welcomed.

My first port of call was to write to Mina Lethbridge, but I sadly discovered that she had died in November 2000. From her will I found the names of a number of individuals who I considered to be key figures in my quest. In January 2006, I drove down to East Sussex from my home in Lincoln to meet with Nicholas Leadbitter – Mina Lethbridge's nephew. Nicholas provided me with an insight into his aunt's life and related happy memories of how he once assisted his Uncle Tom during excavation of the controversial turf-cut figures on the banks of Wandlebury Hillfort. Nicholas was also able to show me a beautiful collection of watercolour paintings that Lethbridge had produced featuring boats and ships at sea and in harbour. Many were of West Country scenes, but others depicted vessels sighted around the Western Isles and in the Baltic Sea. I had always been aware of Tom's dexterity as

an artist, but was particularly overawed by the sheer magnitude of his creative output. I was informed that this collection represented only a small part of Lethbridge's portfolio and it immediately struck me that the time-dated watercolours in Nicholas' possession, provided an important record of his uncle's expeditions.

During my investigations, I came across a sequence of small privately published volumes that Lethbridge had produced during the 1930s. The short tomes were produced as Christmas gifts for friends and family and contained notes and drawings of the preceding year's maritime adventures – usually around the Western Isles. These beautifully illustrated booklets provided a unique log of Lethbridge's undertakings during each year of the decade. Alongside his books *Boats and Boatmen* (Thames & Hudson, 1952) and *Coastwise Craft* (Methuen & Co., 1952) the collection reveals that Tom Lethbridge had made a significant, but as yet unrecognised, contribution to British maritime history.

On the same excursion, I was able to meet with the archaeologist Andrew David to whom Mina had bequeathed the Lethbridge copyright. Andrew's father Humphrey David was a lifelong friend of Tom's and the pair had both been members of Sir James Wordie's aborted expedition to explore the east coast of Greenland in 1923. Andrew's photographic archive was fascinating and I was especially taken by a series of glass slides pertinent to the 1923 voyage. This was one of three expeditions in which Lethbridge accompanied Wordie into Arctic waters. Their inaugural mission in 1921 was to establish whether the volcanic mount of Beerenberg on the island of Jan Mayen was active. I discovered an excellent account of this adventure in 'A Book of Islands' written by Lethbridge's friend W. H. 'Whiskers' Bristowe who was also a member of the successful expedition.

During his visits to the Arctic lands, Lethbridge took it upon himself to study the Innuite culture, paying particular attention to their maritime history. My knowledge of Lethbridge's Arctic adventures was further enhanced by visits to the homes of two of Sir James Wordie's children Peter Wordie and Elizabeth Clark. At Peter's home, I was able to view 8mm footage taken by Dick Feachem on the 1937 expedition. The grainy, black and white film brought to life the stills in Peter's collection.

My drive from Peter Wordie's home in Perthshire down to Branscombe in February 2005 was exhausting, but the result of this extended journey was one of the most rewarding I was to experience during my entire research. Jo Erskine-Collins was Tom and Mina's tenant at Hole House during the 1960s and when I met up with her at her Devonshire home she was in her 93rd year. She was delighted to provide me with a first-hand account of life with Tom and Mina during her residency in the Hole House annex. Jo was privy to, and assisted in, many of the pendulum experiments carried out by Lethbridge. She was also able to provide me with many an amusing anecdote about life at Hole, including a number of visits by the BBC to film pendulum experiments. On one occasion, she accompanied Tom and Mina to the BBC studios in Bristol to undertake a recording for a local news bulletin.

The BBC's Written Archives Centre in Reading was able to provide extensive production details of Lethbridge's involvement with the corporation, but sadly, the footage no longer survives. As well as television appearances, Lethbridge also contributed to a number of radio debates and discussions. A script entitled 'The Islands of the Bless'd' was submitted for the 1953 broadcast 'Myth or Legend'. Lethbridge's script, alongside those of other contributors to the series can be found in a short publication entitled *Myth or Legend* by G. E. Daniel et al. (G. Bell & Sons, 1953). The essay is typical of his approach and it was unconventional methodology, for example, using myth and legend as a detection tool that eventually led many to pour scorn upon his findings. Lethbridge however, remained undeterred by such criticism, for he believed in utilising all evidence available to achieve his objectives.

My research continued by attempting to trace others who had come into contact with Lethbridge during his lifetime. At one of my lectures in Branscombe village hall – organised by Professor Barbara Bender – in November 2006, I discovered two individuals who, as young men, had assisted Lethbridge during his excavations at Hole House during the 1960s. I also conducted an interview with Tom

and Mina's domestic Joy Kiddle who provided me with a unique insight into life in the Lethbridge household. During one of my many visits to Branscombe, I was able to reunite Jo Erskine-Collins with her old home thanks to a guided tour of Hole House, kindly provided by Jeff Pathe, a relative of the current owners of the property.

I discovered that the Cambridge University Library and the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology held a number of archives pertinent to my study. The correspondence between Lethbridge and Sir Cyril Fox proved to be invaluable in the piecing together of Lethbridge's movements during his time at Cambridge. The collection also provided an insight into the unique relationship he had with Fox and it is clear that Lethbridge held the views and opinions of his mentor with high regard. Likewise, the correspondence between Lethbridge and Dr. Margaret Murray provided clues of how he chose to pursue his study of the old Gods of England. Murray was one of the few who considered 'Gogmagog' to be a valuable anthropological study, but her praise appears measured and she was not averse to criticising Lethbridge for his exuberance. However, some might say, that this was indeed a case of 'the pot calling the kettle ...'!

Lethbridge was a prolific letter writer and although there often remains only one side of the dialogue, he had numerous friends and acquaintances with whom he chose to discuss aspects of his studies. Intriguing letters from the likes of F. A. C. Boothby, Frank Glynn and G. B. Gardner suggest that there were a number of like-minded souls who shared Lethbridge's fascination for discovery. Letters to his good friend C. F. 'Fred' Tebbutt reveal Lethbridge's love of nature. His attention to detail is charming and much of the correspondence is dedicated to providing his friend with updates of the delights of the Hole House garden. Lethbridge was a keen ornithologist and he and Tebbutt once embarked on a surveillance mission – commissioned by the Admiralty – to Iceland in 1939. The mission was undertaken on the premise of visiting places mentioned in the Sagas, but an opportunity to go bird-watching on Westerman Island on their return journey was not missed.

Although many of Lethbridge's closest friends and relatives are long since deceased, Lethbridge's niece Mary Rose Rogers provided me with an insight into Lethbridge family life. Mary Rose, daughter of Lethbridge's sister Jacintha, went to live with her grandmother, Lethbridge's mother Violet, after the tragic death of her own parents in 1940. During holidays, she would often visit Cambridge to stay with her Uncle Tom and Aunty Mina. She was also able to provide insight into a brief period of Lethbridge's life when, after the break up of his first marriage to Sylvia Robertson in 1944, he and Mina left Cambridge and bought 'Ardranrive', a smallholding on Kerrera, a small island off the west coast of Scotland. The dream move eventually proved to be unsustainable and Tom and Mina were back living in Cambridge by the end of the war. Likewise, a meeting with Mark Walford, son of Lethbridge's friend Geoffrey Walford, provided another opportunity to discuss family matters, for Mark, often spent time with Tom, Sylvia and their children Christopher, Hugh and Belinda during family holidays at Woolacombe during the 1930s.

Since the outset of my research, I had been aware that an archive of Lethbridge related material existed as part of a private collection owned by John Gadd, Dorset pig consultant. Gadd had acquired the annals after purchasing them from the antiquarian bookseller John Ruston. Both Ruston and Gadd had been present at Hole House when Mina Lethbridge vacated the premises in the spring of 1973 she had commissioned Ruston to take-stock of her husband's archive with a view to a sale, as part of her house clearance and intended move to nearby Ottery St. Mary.

Having studied the correspondence that existed between Gadd and Mina, it had become clear to me that Gadd had his own ambitions to write Lethbridge's biography. I therefore considered it unlikely that he would be willing to share his collection with someone who had a rival ambition. However, on completion of my own research, I decided to 'bite the bullet' and in the spring of 2007, I wrote him a tentative letter outlining my interest in Lethbridge and informing him of my own research. My trepidations were unwarranted, for John wrote back a magnanimous letter offering assistance and free access to his archive. He was delighted that someone had finally written Lethbridge's biography,

for he had shelved his own ambitions many years before. However, Gadd still nursed an ambition to publish his findings on the Mildenhall Treasure; to which Lethbridge was called as an expert witness at the inquest.

During the spring and summer months of 2007, I made a couple of visits to John's Dorset home and collected a wealth of information, prepared for me by John, for inclusion in my biography. Although Lethbridge never kept a formal diary, the Gadd collection contained a number of logbooks that Lethbridge had kept during his numerous sea voyages around the coast of Britain and in Arctic and Baltic waters. The information enabled me to compile an appendix of Lethbridge's annual maritime excursions. Gadd's collection also contained fascinating correspondence between Lethbridge and his good friend Thomas Kendrick, then Director and Principal Librarian of the British Museum. There were also a number of insightful letters from James Whittaker, Managing Director of publishers Andrew Melrose that demonstrated the sardonic wit and humour that he and Lethbridge shared. The Gadd Archive included a fine selection of Lethbridge's sketches and watercolours and beautifully detailed archaeological illustrations relating to his digs at Hollywell Row, Shudy Camps and Burwell.

Since taking possession of the archive in 1973, John Gadd has taken curator care of the collection and he is to be commended for his efforts, for without his intervention it is likely that many of the items would have been lost or discarded during Mina Lethbridge's move from Hole House in 1973. Having achieved his objective: seeing the completion of a Lethbridge biography, John Gadd has since sold his collection to the Cambridge University Library. In doing so, he has fulfilled Mina's desire to see her husband's archive returned to Cambridge.

At the time of writing, my Lethbridge biography remains unpublished. My literary agent, Jeffrey Simmons has made dozens of approaches to publishing houses, but none consider the work commercially viable to issue. However, as I write, we persevere with our quest to seek a publisher for the life story of one of the most extraordinary minds of the 20th century.

Notes

1. *Shanty* (1932), *Some West Country Coasters* (1933), *From Dublin to Elsinore in a Sailing Ship* (1934), *North About – Notes on a Passage from the Clyde to the Åand Islands* (1935), *Short Splices – Some Notes on Ships and Boats* (1936), *Umiak – The European Ancestry of the 'Women's Boat'* (1937), *Fishermen of Durness* (1938), *News from Tili* (1939).

IV. Publications suggested by subscribers

Edward Whimper. *Viajes a través de los majestuosos andes del Ecuador*. Ediciones Abya-Yala, Quito, 2001, 448 pages and maps, 3er. Spanish edition (1st: 1993, 2nd: 1994).

Marta Penhos. *Ver, conocer, dominar: imagenes de Sudamerica a fines del siglo XVIII*. Siglo XXI Editores, Buenos Aires, 2005, 382 pages, illust.

Paul Schmidt, E. Ortiz and J. Santos (editors). *Tributo a Jaime Litvak King (1933–2006)*. Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, Mexico, 2008.