

Sir George Trevelyan: Close Encounters

By Rhoda Cowen

My first meeting with George was during my late teens, around 1928, when my sister, who had met him in Cambridge University, invited him to stay at our family home in Sussex. He seemed to me a strange young man. He had been brought up as an agnostic and was searching desperately for some true meaning to life. This very insecurity may well have enabled him to attain a humility that was to prove such an asset to him in later life. He always said that my father was one of the first people to start him off on a long spiritual path by saying "What matters most of all is God."

Rhoda Cowen with Sir George Through the next years we met from time to time. I went to stay at Wallington, the 18th century mansion that was then the Trevelyan family home. I have wonderful memories of the great house bursting with guests and George's mother gathering us all together after lunch to ask us to choose what to do that afternoon – swimming, rock climbing, walking on the moors etc.

George was staying with us in our family home in London when he opened "The Times" and saw the announcement of his father's gift to the National Trust of Wallington and its large estate (the first time such a gift had been made). He turned a deathly white. To give the family estate to the National Trust was an altruistic move on the part of a man who was a leading figure in the Labour Party, but it was a total shock to George. He had expected to inherit the property and even then had ideas about using it for the purposes of adult education. At that moment his life seemed shattered, his future uncertain, though he later came to see that destiny was being fulfilled. Set in the north-east of England, Wallington was not in an ideal position to be used for adult education, whereas Attingham Park in Shropshire, where he would, after the second world war, find himself as Warden of the Shropshire Adult College, was far more suitable.

In due course, our lives took us in different directions, and I was not to meet him again for many years. However, towards the end of George's 23 years as Warden of the College at Attingham, I attended one of the spiritual courses that he was running. I was thrilled and speechless with admiration for the way he had transformed himself from the young man he had been some 40 years earlier. His deep convictions and his enthusiasm had enabled him to make an incredible success of one of the earliest of the short-term residential adult colleges that were created after the war.

When George retired from Attingham in 1971 he set up the Wrekin Trust to enable him to continue the type of courses that had proved to be so popular at Attingham. At this time my husband was still alive, though by then he had suffered a stroke and needed constant nursing care. George was a faithful friend and came to see us from time to time. I supported what he was doing in founding the Wrekin Trust and was able to attend a goodly number of his lectures as many of them were being held in my home county of Gloucestershire. He was severely handicapped by arthritis and very inconvenienced by his deafness, but his ability to enthuse and inspire his audiences was in no way impaired.



On one visit to us George was enthusiastic about his first lecture tour in England. He was planning to drive for ten days along the south coast from Chichester to Dover, staying with different friends and lecturing. On an impulse I said "but you can't do this alone, driving all

day and speaking every evening." It so happened that I had friends coming to care for my husband for just those dates, but had not arranged a holiday for myself. (Such "coincidences" were to happen many times in the future). I offered to go with him if he so wished. So we went off, and soon found how essential it was to be a team on such a project, as there was much to do. He simply could not have made this trip without help. It was a wonderful and exciting experience for both of us. There were good meetings all the way along the south coast in the big houses of the locality. After this, there were further occasions when I escorted George on expeditions, perhaps staying one night with friends. When my husband died in 1981 it became possible for me to escort George on longer trips, both in the British Isles and overseas. George's reputation was growing and leading to his receiving invitations to lecture from abroad.

In Britain, George was deeply inspired by what he found at Glastonbury, and the Upper Room at Chalice Well, created by Tudor Pole, meant a great deal to him. We toured the south-west of England 3 years running, and we were in touch with many who were playing their part in bringing a new age about, such as Satish Kumar, David Lorimer and Peter Dawkins. The works of Shakespeare were of course of infinite importance to George, and he enjoyed talking about these to the public with Peter Dawkins. George also lectured for Edmee di Pauli at her home in London many times. As we travelled, George was always ready to listen to what others had to say and ideas that rang true to him he transmuted and made his own.

We went to South Africa twice, and he really was in super form there. The first trip was 3 weeks, the second 2 weeks. We stayed with those who had organised the lectures. George always wanted to speak to the blacks, but this was never organised for him. On the second trip we went to Universities and there were some black people in the audiences. Friends were wonderful to us, showing us around Johannesburg, the Drakensburg mountains etc. That was a tremendous experience. People in South Africa were very excited to meet George. He spoke to audiences of over 500 in Johannesburg and Cape Town, where he talked in the largest halls in the universities.

We travelled to many parts of Europe, including Germany and Scandinavia. We went to Sweden a number of times, George often talking to small groups deep in the forests. It was a great privilege to go to the small places in Sweden. Most were holiday homes. We went

right up to the north of the country. Also, we went constantly to Holland, staying in Rotterdam. In fact, we went to all the countries in Europe except the Roman Catholic ones. In France we were at Le Plan, where Lorna St. Aubyn was running events. At so many places there were standing ovations for George on his arrival. He was always disappointed that he was not able to accept invitations to Japan and Australia.

George had many links in the U.S.A. where we fulfilled a number of energetic expeditions. On one occasion we visited the West Coast and Peter Caddy (one of the 3 founders of the Findhorn Community) set aside two weeks to be with us, giving us a specially wonderful trip. We were in both the eastern and western states of the U.S.A., and travelled right across the States, but never went to the south or to Mexico.

Sir George with Rhoda. We were touring flat out for 6 or 7 years after my husband's death. Escorting George felt to be a role I was destined to play. It was uncanny the way I always seemed to be available when he needed me to escort him. We travelled through forests and through snow-covered wilderness, in private aircraft and in small cars that had seen more reliable days, making so many friends from widely varying background. As we set off on longer tours I wondered if it might become tedious listening to George every day. Should I have taken some knitting? But each event was quite different. As a Swedish friend wrote; "Listening to George is always inspiring; he talks about ideas, ideas that are alive to himself, every lecture is an adventure and a mind-opener. Even if you have heard the words before, every time you grasp more of the depth of meaning. And what an extraordinary oratory it was." An hour without notes, his ideas bubbling and sparkling, and carried even further into different fields by constant quotations – usually poetry stored in his head. He always spoke without notes to a self-chosen title: "Living into Change", "What really is happening now", "A Vision of Hope in an Age of Turmoil", "The Use of Poetry in the Expansion of Consciousness", "The Active Eye in Architecture". His only books of reference were four little books of quotations, more precious than fine gold, which when in full swing he did not need, but could quote and quote, each carrying some thought that would spring into a new life of its own. The bigger the audiences the greater the challenge to him, and he loved to raise his powerful actor's voice to reach the very

back row. On some occasions we might have travelled a long way only to find a handful of people, but he would speak just as faithfully and with as much vigour. Nearly always we were invited back, so we made friends, and there were wonderful welcomes from audiences, and often standing ovations.



George's teaching – and indeed his personal life – were totally centred on God and the Christ. Having been brought up as an agnostic, his thesis was unentangled with church doctrine and theological disputations, and what he said and lived, came with personal impact. His own 'spiritual awakening' came through hearing a lecture on the work of the Austrian philosopher and scientist, Rudolf Steiner. Into these ideas George interwove the thinking of the great poets (especially Shakespeare, Blake, Traherne, Manley Hopkins, Wordsworth, T.S. Eliot and Christopher Fry) and other

writers such as Teilard de Chardin. He created a very real synthesis, a spiritual world view which in the 60's was part of a real renaissance in Christian thinking. He shared these views with his audiences and they were a real magnet to young and old... all were spellbound.

These lectures and meetings brought a powerful spirituality to so many people, offering them a new approach, a spark of life and meaning, and a wider perspective and inspiration, which felt to be of such vital importance that it was a delight and privilege to help in such a work of enlightenment.

George's attitude was never to plan events with the purpose of making himself better known so that they would lead him to a wider stage. He lived in the moment, accepting as many of the invitations he received as possible. He often said that he was happy to talk to anybody who wanted to listen to him, whether they were part of a large or small group. Nobody else could have done what he did in the same way. It was amazing what he did. The silences after his speeches and his accolades were moving. Memories of him became part of people's lives. We can never really assess the value of what he did, yet he remained so unassuming and selfless. The journeys were extraordinary and planted seeds in so many places where 'new age' work was beginning only slowly. In these trips it became so clear to me that George was a truly 'holy man'; his spirituality influenced every aspect of his life and he was always so humble about everything. We worked non-stop on most of these tours but they were, for both of us, a thrilling experience.

Throughout his life George inspired many people and through his work at Attingham became a focus for New Age thinkers. His friends arranged a remarkable tribute to him for his 80th birthday. Everyone who knew him and had been inspired by him was encouraged to go to Imperial College and over 2000 people came to the celebration. Most people would be giving up by the time they reach 80 but George was on sparkling form and began the convention by a very funny resume of his life. He was followed by several eminent New Age speakers, all of whom added their own personal tribute to George. The day was packed with interesting talks and the response was staggering. Outside it was a cold and wet November day but inside the atmosphere was electric. [This paragraph contributed by John and Elizabeth Cowen].

Towards the end of George's life he promised himself that he was never again going to say anything negative about anybody. Making and keeping this promise seemed to me to add a new quality of 'holiness' to his life, a Christ-like quality which I was so aware of in his last two or three years. This was important to the growth of his soul.

The quality of charisma is ephemeral and lacks adequate definition. However, George definitely had it, whatever it was. He had a spellbinding personality and one which could relate to all ages. His ability to focus on the person in his presence at the time made him very attractive and enhanced the listening capacity of his audience. His love of English literature shone through his talks and he frequently quoted long tracts of poems learnt by heart. He had a strong but melodic voice, which he used to maximum advantage.

He lived what he talked about, and this was very impressive to watch. I used to feel so humbled. I look back on him more as a lecturer than a writer – his lectures were so intensely alive. If they could live on they would continue to be meaningful to future generations.

*Compiled by Ruth Nesfield-Cookson from interviews given to her by Rhoda Cowen and from Rhoda's book entitled *The Gold and Silver Threads* (ISBN 0 7509 0766 5). They have a few copies of Rhoda's privately printed book still available. This can be obtained from them at Over Court, Bisley, Stroud GL6 7BE, UK.*