

Walter Hooper: 1931-2020

A Brief Memoir, and Personal

by James Como

December 7th. Minutes ago I learned that Walter Hooper had died some hours earlier in an Oxford nursing home. He had been well cared for and, at the end, was serene. Many people nearby loved him dearly, which is no surprise. Very many others farther away who knew of his failing condition (though perhaps not known him) hold him in their prayers.

But this no obituary. The details of Hooper's life (including most especially his meeting with Pope St. John Paul II and his subsequent conversion to Catholicism) are readily available. Here, with too few strokes, I hope merely to sketch some lineaments of my long friendship with him. I begin near the end, two years ago.

To celebrate our fiftieth wedding anniversary, Alexandra and I crossed the Atlantic on the *Queen Mary II*. After a few days in London we went on to Oxford, where we found Walter frail of body but not mind. We three lunched at the Trout then went on to the Bird and Baby, where the Inklings would gather. There, in the corner nearest the plaque commemorating the group, sat a young couple. They were avid readers of Lewis and Tolkien and so were visiting a site. "Would you like to meet the man who wrote that plaque," I asked. They looked up incredulously, the wife eventually answering "yes, very much." And so they got to meet Walter Hooper, who spent several minutes conversing with them.



Walter and Alexandra outside the Trout, 2018

Later my editor at the Oxford press joined us, a lovely and lively young woman. She was delighted to meet the man to whom my book is dedicated and was gleefully amused when he asked, "will you marry me?" We saw him home, and that's the last time I saw him, though we would speak by phone a number of times thereafter. Before our departure he told me how contented he was, how settled, and especially how comforted he was to know that two accomplished friends would see to his papers.

Those phone calls routinely began with me identifying myself as Kojak. Walter loved the show and the character, not least because of its New York setting. For him *Kojak* was something akin to Proust's Madeleine cookie, rasing up a trunkload of memories. Once at his Oxford home he offered to make a spaghetti dinner for me. In the kitchen as we chatted he began to count out strands. "What are you doing?" "Making sure we have enough." Those of you who know the story of Paxford and his buying only small amounts of sugar at any one time lest the world suddenly ended will chuckle. "But not too much," he added. I took all the pasta and put it in the boiling water. "We won't have leftovers. I guarantee it."

On an earlier visit my father had come along. We all visited the Kilns, where Mrs. Miller was still in residence. My father had spent the war in a Midlands surgical hospital and badly wanted to visit the place. We rented a car; I drove, sometimes forgetting to *stick to the left*. My father allowed that St. Christopher, then the patron saint of travelers, had jumped out a few miles back. Walter laughed at that, not only at the time but for years after. Still, I couldn't find the place and was about to give up. Walter, from the back seat, leaned to my ear near the window and whispered, "don't. Just don't give up." We found the site, now a turkey farm, but the look on my father's face as he stood in the door of his old barracks told me how right Walter was. I remain grateful to him for that to this day, and told him so publicly when he received the Clyde S. Kilby Award for Lifetime Achievement at the Wade Center.

In 1974 I spent a semester in Oxford on sabbatical with my wife and toddler son. As it happened Walter's mother, known as Mrs. Hooper-Hooper (because she thought a hyphenated last name would suit her better

in England!), and her sister Aunt Twiggy (an ironic nickname) were visiting him. On our first night or second night in Oxford they joined us for dinner in the digs that Walter had scouted for us. The phone rang. My brother told me that our father had died. I had to fly back to New York, the sadness flattening me. But I had no worries. Walter, Mrs. H.-H., and Aunt Twiggy saw to my family.

When in New York he stayed at our place. On one of those occasions he was stymied by a bit for an introduction he was writing to Lewis's diary, which he had edited. "Can you help?" "Why don't you turn in and let me write this patch," and I did. The next morning he was delighted, and there it still stands. Once he thought to keep a diary (and, boy, has he ever). What did I think? I said that, *if* he did, he must be all in and not stop, and he was, and he didn't – he still may not have!

From the beginning he was Uncle Walter to our two children. To him my Peruvian mother-in-law (who told him he resembled James Mason, only handsomer) was Hedy Lamar. He smoked cigarettes, drank bourbon, and loved to talk. He liked movies, too. In Oxford we saw *Chinatown* – with a preposterously complicated plot that ends with the line, "it's Chinatown." He asked, "is Alexandra like Chinatown?" I answered, "no, more like Byzantium." Of course he told my wife what I had said as soon as he saw her.

Sometime later he faced a febrile challenge to his integrity with enormous grace. "What should I do," he asked. "Nothing," I answered. "Let others speak for you. The falsehood will be exposed," and it was. As a Southerner he was naturally gracious. Very soon after the founding of the New York C. S. Lewis Society he became a friend of the Society (and honorary member), helping to lubricate our relationship with the Major (who would also accept honorary membership). He would tell me how important the Society was in convincing publishers to keep Lewis's books in print and to bring out others, and, of course, he visited more than one meeting.

We would correspond, with occasional long lapses. Then we would pick up where we had left off. The same was true of visits. These became filled with memories great and small, too many to recount here. As with all rich and long-standing friendships they give body to an organic whole the description of which lends itself to a reliving in conversation rather than in print. So in that light I forgo a mention of

the many little gifts he gave to Alexandra, the jokes (never rude or nasty) shared about friends held in common, or the walks, talks, and dinner parties we enjoyed together. (Usually the post mortems were more riotously entertaining than the dinners.) I forgo those, except for one.

Now, approaching my dotage and fifty years after the fact, I am struck by how keenly – vividly and in detail – I recall meeting Walter Hooper for the first time. Alexandra and I showed up at Keble College where he was caring for Kathryn Farrer, whose husband had been a dear friend of Lewis's. We knocked, and after several minutes a paint-spattered, disheveled man answered. "We're here to see Father Hooper [at that time Walter was an Anglican priest]. Is he available." The man invited us into the small hall and asked that we wait. After about ten minutes that same man, now cleaned up and adorned with his collar, came down the broad stairs and, with a smile, said, "oh well hello, I'm Walter Hooper. Please come in."



photo © Lancia E. Smith

Walter at his Oxford flat, 2018

That was at 3p.m. There followed tea, dinner, a short walking tour of Oxford, and very much talk. At some point Alexandra returned to our hotel. He and I continued talking over pints. He told me some items about Lewis and his estate that would not become public knowledge until years later. We would part at 2a.m. A few years thereafter he asked me to be an executor of his estate. I accepted, and we never spoke of it again (and I doubt it remains the case).

I am certain that without Walter Hooper's labors on behalf of the Lewis legacy the great man's reputation would not be as full-bodied as it is, nor would it have developed as quickly. In this Walter's achievement is genuinely monumental. From his first meeting with Lewis in 1963, through his positions as Lewis's literary executor and advisor to the estate,

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his stewardship continues to yield rich fruit. On matters Lewisian there was simply no one more knowledgeable, devoted or generous than he. He considered us all colleagues; he had no airs, none.

Earlier I mentioned that I had written a small swatch for his introduction to Lewis's diary, *All My Road Before Me*. It comes in that part of the introduction where Walter is discussing Lewis's relationship with Mrs. Moore. Here it is:

Life is more richly textured – or as Lewis would put it, 'thicker' – than we expect it to be. None of us is either this or that; rather we and all the 'ordinary' people we meet and know are many things at once, full of shading and nuance. [Lewis was] an enduring exemplum of Christian charity.

And there was my friend, and more. To paraphrase St. Timothy, he fought the good fight, he finished the course, and he certainly kept the faith. To me he became a brother, a good and thoughtful older brother. *Requiescet in Pace*.



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Walter outside the Kilns, 2016