

CODA

Matthew Arnold and Me: A Personal Memoir

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If you had asked me when I entered graduate school to make a list of the literary figures whose works merited a lifetime of study, Matthew Arnold probably wouldn't have even made the top twenty-five. Like most students enrolling in a graduate program at American universities, I entered Tulane University in 1972 with large gaps in my literary education. Somewhere in my distant memory I recall having read a few of Matthew Arnold's poems and perhaps an essay (or more likely an excerpt from one) in a sophomore survey course (in near-prehistoric days, all students at Loyola University, my undergraduate alma mater, were required to take a year-long sequence in British literature). Although the new literary theory had begun to be introduced into graduate programs across the country, at Tulane the New Criticism, various types of formalism, and even some old-fashioned historical criticism were still in vogue. We concentrated on the six periods of English literature and four in American lit; consequently, we dutifully studied a very modest selection of Arnold's poetry and prose in "Readings in Nineteenth-Century British Literature," but nowhere else. My seminars at Tulane were "Hemingway," "Tennyson," and "Henry James." For a year I worked on a draft of a dissertation on Dickens, only to change my mind at the last minute when, infatuated with *Idylls of the King*, I switched my focus and decided to write on Tennyson. Writing about Arnold never crossed my mind.

Unlike most of my fellow graduate students, I was not struggling to make ends meet financially while in school, nor frantically scouring the job market when I finished my coursework. But I was a slave to another master. I had attended graduate school while on active duty in the U.S. Army. After two years of full-time study, I left Tulane for a three-year assignment on the faculty at the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point. There I completed my dissertation, but then went to Europe for another military assignment. Not only was Arnold a distant memory, but I began to think that my future lay in a direction other than literary study.

Things changed in 1980 when the Army assigned me as an exchange officer at the U.S. Naval Academy (USNA). The academic circumstances there were markedly different from West Point. While the West Point faculty was made up almost exclusively of active-duty officers, the Naval Academy faculty was one-half “civilian”—professors just like the ones at colleges and universities across the country. The civilian faculty at USNA were hired out of graduate school, earned tenure and promotion, and spent their time teaching, writing, attending conferences, and carrying out the responsibilities of professionals in higher education across America. As a result, my assignment to USNA gave me an opportunity to work with faculty whose careers I thought I might emulate at some time in the future.

One member of the English Department, Allan Lefcowitz, had written his dissertation on Arnold and was still very interested in Arnold scholarship. He had attended the famous 1972 MLA Session on Arnold, where Cecil Lang of the University of Virginia agreed to edit the Arnold letters and Nadean Bishop, an assistant professor at Eastern Michigan University, took on the task of publishing a newsletter for Arnold scholars. Bishop quickly found the job too onerous, so Lefcowitz brought *The Arnold Newsletter* to the Naval Academy in 1974 (from which it was distributed *free* until the mid-1980s). By the time I arrived in 1980, the *Newsletter* had been transformed into *The Arnoldian*. Lefcowitz was still involved with the journal but had passed on editorial duties to Professors John Hill and Stephen Ross, who were publishing not only news and

notes about Arnold scholarship, but articles and reviews on Arnold and other nineteenth-century figures.

As Bishop had before them, the staff of *The Arnoldian* were finding that producing a quarterly journal was hard work, so they invited two newcomers to the department to join the enterprise. Nancy Wicker, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and a student of Arnold scholar David DeLaura, was asked to do some scholarly work. Because I was a military officer (long on organizational skills, short on scholarly acumen—according to stereotype), I was asked to become managing editor. I suppose my civilian colleagues thought I couldn't do much harm keeping the subscription lists and dealing with the publisher. I accepted the position gladly and set about learning what I could about Arnold's writings and the published criticism about them.

During the 1980s *The Arnoldian* grew from a 16-page newsletter into a perfect-bound, 75- 100-page semi-annual publication. I like to think my diligent handling of administrative matters and my enthusiasm for the work led to my being asked to become Book Review Editor in 1982. It's more likely, though, that I was available when my colleague Steve Ross, a civilian professor, found that duties as Review Editor were interfering with his work on Faulkner, his first love. Another unexpected opportunity arose for me when Lefcowitz invited me to co-author an article on Arnold's relationship with James Bryce, a nineteenth-century politician and historian. Our paper was accepted for presentation at what was certainly one of the most significant Arnold symposiums of the twentieth century: the 1985 Texas A&M conference. Big guns from all over the world attended that session, and I found myself rubbing elbows with the likes of David DeLaura and Park Honan. I also met two young Arnoldians who impressed me greatly: Bill Thesing from the University of South Carolina and Clint Machann, a Texas A&M professor whose work on the conference (and subsequent work with Forrest Burt on the book produced from the proceedings) were, in my opinion, first-rate.

Though I left the Naval Academy in 1984 for an assignment at the Pentagon, I continued to work in a reduced role on *The Arnoldian*. A

fortuitous circumstance allowed me to return to USNA in 1986 as Chair of the English Department. I resumed a more active role with the journal, becoming editor in 1986. During my second stint at USNA, I had another one of those fortunate opportunities that drew me further into the circle of Arnold scholars. Seemingly out of the blue, Allan Lefcowitz and I received an invitation from Cecil Lang to visit him at the home of one of Arnold's descendants who was living in Washington DC. Lang was continuing his work on the Arnold letters but was interested in publishing an album that the Arnold family had given him. The album contained numerous letters collected by Arnold and given to his daughter Eleanor, who passed it on to her son, Arnold Whitridge. At that meeting Lang asked us to work with him to produce *An Arnold Family Album*, which we made the valedictory issue of *The Arnoldian*. Collaborating with Lang proved to be one of the most rewarding experiences of my professional life. Lefcowitz and I became 'publishers,' shepherding the *Album* from manuscript to printing and distribution. We completed the project in 1992.

In 1989 I retired from the Army and left the Naval Academy for a deanship in Colorado, taking with me the journal which had now been retitled *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, the name it retains today. If I needed a boost in my appreciation of Arnold once I left the English Department for administrative posts, I got it in 1991 at the Arnold conference sponsored by Baylor University. There another panoply of Arnold scholars assembled to discuss recent criticism and to further extol Arnold's virtue. Frederick Whitridge, Arnold's great-grandson, gave one of the keynote speeches.

When I moved to Ohio in 1992 to become an academic vice president, I left the journal in the hands of a capable scholar, Barry Tharaud, who continues as editor today. Although I remained with the Editorial Board of *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, my immediate association with Arnold waned during the early 1990s; I was too busy worrying about faculty issues, student scheduling, and budgets. But in 1996, a former colleague at the Naval Academy, Phil Jason, let me know that Camden House, an academic publishing firm (now an imprint of Boydell

& Brewer), was looking to expand its Critical Perspectives series and would entertain proposals on nineteenth-century British authors. I wrote to inquire about the possibility of writing volumes on either Tennyson or Arnold. The acquisitions editor asked me to write about Arnold's literary reputation. For the next three years, I devoted every spare moment I could find to collecting and assessing more than a century's worth of Arnold criticism. It was like being back in graduate school again. *Matthew Arnold: The Critical Legacy* appeared in 1999. My study was intended to give more than a passing glance at trends in criticism, assessing the work of these critics rather than Arnold himself.

After completing my book on Arnold, I moved on to other interests, devoting most of my time to my full-time job as President of Alvernia College, now Alvernia University. I was able to return to scholarly pursuits without interruption from administrative duties upon my retirement from Alvernia in 2005. Yet I was not involved in Arnold scholarship in any meaningful way until seven years ago, when Barry Tharaud asked me to rejoin the editorial staff of *Nineteenth-Century Prose* as Reviews Editor.

In recent years, others have referred to me in professional circles as an Arnold scholar. I would modify that title, and not from false humility, either. One need only look at the body of work produced by David DeLaura, Lang's magisterial edition of Arnold's letters, or the fine criticism of dozens of true Arnold scholars, among them Sidney Coulling, J. Hillis Miller, Patrick McCarthy, Joseph Carroll, John Farrell, Stefan Collini, David Riede, Antony Harrison, Linda Ray Pratt, Bill Thesing, Stefan Collini, James Walter Caulfield, and especially Clint Machann. The list could go on, and I know I've left out many who have made the study of Arnold's works the center of their professional careers. The real community of Arnold scholars has been, and remains, an interesting and dedicated crowd, and I am proud to be associated with them, however obliquely.

If, however, I'm considered an Arnold scholar, it seems fair to ask: Why has Arnold held such fascination for me? I wish I could offer a

sophisticated answer that would both inspire future generations to continue studies in Arnold. I once heard David DeLaura answer this question with precision and eloquence, citing from memory the passages in Arnold that both inspired and infuriated him. Unfortunately, my answer is much simpler, and more mundane. My appreciation for Arnold's work is twofold: I find his poetry personally appealing, and I find his prose filled with what seem to me common-sense reasons for continuing the study of literature and understanding culture in its broadest terms.

Arnold once wrote to his mother that his poetry was more modern than that of his contemporaries. That observation has proven true for me—and after all, as Walter Pater pointed out, what poetry means *to me* must count for something, shouldn't it? When I was teaching undergraduates, I found that Arnold's poetry resonated with them as well. Perhaps this is so because he was a young man when he wrote most of it, and therefore in touch with the feelings that many young men and women experience. But in my retirement years I've come to realize that poems like "The Buried Life," "Dover Beach," and "Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse" speak with equal poignancy to one who's viewing middle age in the rearview mirror.

Arnold is also, despite his liberal pronouncements, essentially conservative by temperament, something that endears him to a retired military officer and retired college president. Education is essentially a conservative enterprise, despite what my liberal colleagues in English Departments might say. The professoriate may rush to protest wars or conservative social and fiscal policies, but see what happens when you ask them to reform the tenure system or drop a course of study that students no longer wish to pursue but in which they are expert. Ironically, I am actually *glad* that professors remain stodgy in defending both the practices and content of the discipline. After all, aren't they just defending "the best that has been thought and said"? While what's "best" may change from generation to generation, keeping alive the notion that we should pass on whatever wisdom we have to the next generation seems particularly Arnoldian to me.

While I have always loved Arnold's poetry, I find myself drawn to his prose, not simply for what he has to say but also because I can empathize with him when I consider the conditions under which he wrote most of it. Arnold and I led similar lives, shuttling "between two worlds"—squeezing in opportunities to write while working full-time, I as a college president, he as a schools inspector. Frequently, I thought of Arnold on occasions when I began my day with a workout before 6:00 a.m., hustled from Board meetings in the community to appointments at the office throughout the morning, lunch with a prospective donor, an afternoon class (yes, I taught while president—every semester but one), an outdoor sporting event in the late afternoon, a few stolen moments to read or write followed by a dinner sponsored by community leaders to support a local charity. But that schedule seems only moderately hectic when I consider the schedule Arnold was forced to keep in times when communications and travel were much more challenging. Consider the toll it must have taken for Her Majesty's Schools Inspector to keep up the pace demanded of him by his job. To cite just one example: In a letter written to his mother dated 7 May 1864, Arnold describes his schedule for the preceding Tuesday:

Up at 6, writing and working till breakfast at 8½. In the Saffron Walden school at ¼ to 10, and from then till ½ past 12, at which hour a carriage came to the door for me and I got into it, leaving my assistants at work to finish for me; drove to Great Bardfield, through the heart of Essex, 12 miles in the rain; reached the school at 2, there till ¼ past three—then up to Great Bardfield Hall, belonging to a half farmer, half gentleman, a Quaker, to dinner; at ½ past 6 the carriage at the door again, and at 8 I was put down at the school door in Saffron Walden again, where the scholars of a night school kept me till nearly 10. (*Letters* II:304)

Small wonder that he described his efforts in an 1852 letter to his colleague Wyndham Slade as "fighting the battle of life" (*Letters* I:244).

How Arnold managed to find time to write on the wide range of topics for which he is known today boggles the mind. Yet by the 1880s his work was so well known and well respected among his contemporaries that Disraeli—by no means a sympathizer with many of Arnold’s ideas—could tell Arnold that he regarded him as “a classic in his own lifetime” (qtd Machann and Burt 259). Whenever I became overwhelmed with the ‘daily grind,’ I would remind myself that Arnold kept an even more demanding schedule and yet managed to produce some of the world’s most enduring literary works. Certainly the tedium of grading freshman compositions pales by comparison with Arnold’s having to pore over stacks of examination papers from children whose performance he was being asked to judge, and writing reports for superiors who often seemed to care little about what he found during his sojourns across the country.

Arnold lived in the real world, but—and this is what I find most admirable in him—in the Romantic spirit expressed so clearly by Wordsworth (whom Arnold admired), he never let the world become “too much with” him. Despite his “getting and spending,” he found time to live a full life in the pursuit of “the good.” As an unconverted Aristotelian, the product of a Jesuit education, I find Arnold a role model for those of us who pursue careers in academic leadership while struggling to maintain our expertise in—and enjoyment for—the academic field that drew us into the profession in the first place.

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