

Inklings Forever

Volume 4 A Collection of Essays Presented at the
Fourth Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S.
Lewis & Friends

Article 23

3-2004

Silent Music: The Letters of Ruth Pitter

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Recommended Citation

King, Don (2004) "Silent Music: The Letters of Ruth Pitter," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 4 , Article 23.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol4/iss1/23

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume IV

A Collection of Essays Presented at
The Fourth

FRANCES WHITE EWBank COLLOQUIUM

ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2004
Upland, Indiana

**Silent Music:
The Letters of Ruth Pitter**

Don King

Silent Music: The Letters of Ruth Pitter

Don King

Although Ruth Pitter (1897-1992) is not well known, her credentials as a poet are extensive, and in England from the mid 1930's to the mid 1970's she maintained a modest yet loyal readership.¹ In total she produced eighteen volumes of new and collected verse.² Her *A Trophy of Arms* (1936) won the Hawthornden Prize for Poetry in 1937, and in 1954 she was awarded the William E. Heinemann Award for *The Ermine* (1953). Most notably, perhaps, she became the first woman to receive the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1955; this unprecedented event merited a personal audience with the queen. Furthermore, from 1946 to 1972 she was often a guest on BBC radio programs, and from 1956 to 1960 she appeared regularly on the BBC's *The Brains Trust*, one of the first television "talk" programs; her thoughtful comments on the wide range of issues discussed by the panelists were a favorite among viewers. In 1974 The Royal Society of Literature elected her to its highest honor, a Companion of Literature, and in 1979 she received her last national award when she was appointed a Commander of the British Empire.³

In spite of this high regard, however, Pitter lived most of her life in relative obscurity since she did not found a new school or participate in the modernist movement heralded by T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. However, she worked at her craft in a quiet, consistent, and deliberate fashion. She writes about this in "There is a Spirit," the preface to *Poems: 1926-1966*:

My purpose [as a poet] has never varied . . . It has been simply to capture and express some of the secret meanings which haunt life and language: the silent music, the dance in stillness, the hints and echoes and messages of which everything is full; the smile on the face of the tiger, or of the Bernini seraph. The silent music is within oneself too, or it would not be detected elsewhere. In the face of mundane joy it says ". . . but all the same"! and in the face of horror ". . . but all the same!" As though the normal targets of consciousness were somehow unreal; life,

bursting with its secret, sits hugging itself until we have read the riddle. (xi-xii)

Accordingly, it is ironic that in spite of critical acclaim and an impressive body of work, there exists no collection of her letters, no critical biography, and no comprehensive critical evaluation of her poetry. While this is not the place to remedy all these deficiencies, the letters discussed here offer an initial biographical insight into Pitter's aesthetic, intellectual, moral, and spiritual life.

Pitter, in spite of earning her living as an artisan (doing ornamental painting on furniture, glassware, and trays) and having to work very hard in order to make ends meet,⁴ was a voluminous letter writer. Her correspondents read like a "Who's Who" of twentieth-century British literary luminaries, including A. R. Orage, Hiliare Belloc, Marianne Moore, Walter de la Mare, Julian Huxley, Hugh MacDiarmid, John Masefield, Phillip and Ottoline Morrell, Herbert Palmer, C.S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, James Stephens, Richard Church, Stephen Tennant, Dorothy L. Sayers, Siegfried Sassoon, Lawrence Whistler, Virginia Sackville-West, Lord David Cecil, Roy Campbell, John Gawsworth, Constance Sitwell, Arthur W. Russell, Hallam Tennyson, Evelyn Waugh, John Wain, Hugo Dyson, Adam Fox, Kathleen Raine, and Australian Nettie Vance.

Three writers in particular dominate her correspondence: Lord David Cecil, C.S. Lewis, and A. W. Russell.⁵ Pitter's correspondence to Lord David Cecil⁶ (1902-1986) actually begins with a letter to his wife, Rachel, on Mar. 7, 1939, in which Pitter congratulates Lady Cecil on the birth of her son, Jonathan; Pitter adds that she genuinely admires her husband's recent book: "I must write soon to your husband to tell him how much I admire and enjoy his book [*The Young Melbourne*, 1939]."⁷ What eventually resulted was a warm friendship and correspondence (including almost sixty letters) between Pitter and the Cecils that lasted until the end of his life. David Cecil found deep satisfaction her poetry. For instance, he writes (October? 1939):

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I hope you will forgive a total stranger writing to you. But I feel I must tell you how very beautiful I think your poems [A Trophy of Arms]. I read them last week in a fit of drab depression brought on by the condition of the world: and I cannot tell you what a ray of light spread out on my horizon to discover that some one cared still to write such firm spontaneous glowing poetry—could feel the essential normal beauties of soul & body, so freshly, so strongly, so unsentimentally. I read you're A Mad Lady's Garland too & had liked that very much especially the "Fowls Terrestrial & Celestial": but in your new book you have soared still higher. Thank you very, very much.⁸

On Nov. 27, 1939, Pitter replies to Cecil: "Many and heartfelt thanks for your delightful letter, which affords me more pleasure and sustenance than I can express. I shall place it among my few treasures—few, because I am no letter-keeper in general. What you say about the severity of sentiment in my work fortifies me exceedingly, since I well know that to deserve this I must have traveled a long way from the beginnings of poetry in me." About her *The Spirit Watches*, Cecil writes (Summer? 1940):

I need must tell you how honoured & delighted I was to receive your present. I have read it with very great pleasure. Perhaps you are right; I do not know if I admired anything in it as much as I admired some things in *The Trophy of Arms*. But—and I say with this in all sincerity—I enjoyed *The Spirit Watches* more than the work of any other poet now writing in English. It is partly the exquisite accomplishment of your craftsmanship; it is still more a sort of deep aloof severity of sentiment, which heals & strengthens the heart. And God knows one is grateful for that today.

Lacking a university education, Pitter found the enthusiastic support of a scholar like Cecil a great encouragement both aesthetically and intellectually; his praise of her poetry validated, nourished, and affirmed her as nothing else could have. We can only imagine the genuine pleasure she felt when reading passages from Cecil's letters such as: "Your poems have always been able to move me in a way no other poems of our day do: & these are no exception. Indeed, you seem, if I may say so, to here combine the two strongest [elements of your writing] in a way they have not been combined before—I mean your beautifully exact descriptive style,

with you rare abstract & symbolic manner" (Dec.? 1940). In addition, Cecil's recognition gave her simple delight—the delight anyone laboring in relative obscurity deeply cherishes.

To him she also freely admits to the struggles she faced living in World War II London during the Blitz, commenting at various times on how her ornamental painting business was nearing collapse as well as the constant threat of bombing. On July 17, 1941, she writes:

The last three raids in London were not nice to be in. That of April 16 (I believe I wrote to you during its early stages) was not so bad, because we had a lot of action in the immediate neighbourhood and had to get busy. But the one three days afterwards was horrid. I had a bad reaction by then, and there was nothing quite close, so I sat in the cellar and had the horrors. The May one, when the House of Commons was hit, seemed very bad here: though there was nothing close by, they must have been using very heavy stuff, for the earth seemed convulsed. I don't like to think my nerve is going, after living through so much . . . The poor old Church! There is only a fragment left, but that fragment does contain the finest tomb of all. Sir H. Sloane's monument at the SE corner of the site is also perfectly intact. I think this was a man so fortunate that his good luck even extends thus far, when nearly all else on the spot is blasted to powder. We picked up sundry old bones, fallen out of the walls, no doubt. How little the possessors could have imagined this disaster to their relics! One poor gentleman, tolerably complete, was put into a dustbin pro. tem. My niece, who is doing orthopedics, said he must have waddled in his gait, and gave the reasons. Most strange, to see a blooming girl of 18 standing among the shattered tombs with an old thighbone in her hand, calmly discoursing upon it: and yet with reverence and regret too.

Pitter's love of gardening also comes through in her letters to Cecil: "You ask if I have ever been a full-time gardener—no, but I could and would be nothing else if free to do so; I am sure I have the strength and skill enough; only I think I should subside into a vegetable peace almost without individuality; I should be happy, but it might not be right. My present habit of spending about 3 days out of 14 wholly in cultivating food suits the mind very well" (July 13, 1942). Indeed, Pitter's deep love for nature, reflected frequently in her poetry, found practical expression throughout her life in the many gardens she maintained.

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The extent of their friendship is illustrated by letters arranging visits to each other, discussions about numerous literary topics and personalities, comments about the books each was writing, reflections on family matters, and observations about current news items. For example, Cecil writes on April 2, 1945: "This is only to say how beautiful I find your new volume [*The Bridge*]. I had of course seen several before—notably 'The Swan Bathing' . . . but I read this again with enhanced pleasure; & what beautiful reviews there are! 'The Estuary' seems to me a perfect piece of writing & there are several others as good—'The Coloured Glass' & 'Hoverfly on Poppy.' And the 'Cygnet' is very fine. I don't feel I have much to say—You know how deeply I admire your art: & how it speaks to my heart as well as my taste." In June 1954 Pitter writes and invites Cecil to recuperate at her home after he suffered an injury: "You *have* had a bad shaking, though I was very glad to hear there was no bad break. I have been thinking—since you were so kind as to say you liked being here, would it be of any service to stay here for a few days, or as long as you like, in all simplicity, as if you were staying with your old nurse? You could have the parlour and little bedroom up-stairs, and sit there, or with us in the workroom, just as you pleased." About Cecil's book, *The Cecils of Hatfield House: An English Ruling Family* (1973), Pitter remarks: "The book has been quite an obsession with me from the first minute I could get alone with it. For the first time in my life I have a clearly detailed and judicious account of the great Queen [Elizabeth I], and have been able to realize her vicissitudes, her genius in combating them, her utterly unique personality" (Oct. 31, 1973).

Pitter, who never married, may have found in Cecil the kind of friendship that rarely occurs between an unmarried woman and a married man. Two late letters suggest this. On Dec. 28, 1978 she writes Cecil about the aging process: "Oh, *does* your sense of the unearthly fade? For you yourself are not very earthly, at least to me and I am sure to many others. I could feel you about long before I knew you—in adolescence I was sure there was something—someone—a child? Not very many miles to the north." Then in 1985 near her eighty-eighth birthday, she tells him: "Do you know, I dreamed of you the other night. We were walking in a great wide bare park—very like Windsor Great Park—and we found (improbably) a plant of wild strawberry with flowers fruit, which we made into a little posy and did not eat the fruit because it was so pretty. How *sensitive* this was of us." With Cecil's death the following year, Pitter lost a cherished friend and an earnest, if physically detached, emotional support.

Pitter first became aware of C.S. Lewis through their mutual friend, David Cecil. On Feb. 1, 1941, Cecil writes Pitter: "I shared [your poetry] with C.S. Lewis the teacher of literature at Magdalen here & a very

remarkable man—he wrote a book on medieval romance called *The Allegory of Love*, which is a superb piece of vital, vivid criticism—& he was deeply struck & went off to buy your poems." On April 16, 1941, Pitter writes Cecil: "I am much interested and honoured by what you tell me of C.S. Lewis. I shall indeed like to have his book [*The Allegory of Love*]." A year later Cecil writes: "Did I tell you C.S. Lewis of Magdalen College is far the most brilliant English Literature man in Oxford, admired your work so earnestly when I showed him" (Summer 1942?). In spite of Cecil's comments about how Lewis appreciated Pitter's poetry, she only becomes excited about Lewis later after she acquires and reads *The Screwtape Letters*; she writes Cecil: "I found the book which has excited me more than anything has done for a long time—"The Screwtape Letters" . . . I do hope you have read it. He must be a phoenix; it says in the book that he is a Fellow, I forget of which college, but am nearly sure it is an Oxford one, so very likely you know him. I have actually *bought* the book" (July 13, 1942).

Shortly after this, she heard his BBC radio broadcasts (later published as *Mere Christianity*). While she was brought up in a nominal Christian family, her own faith only became energized after hearing Lewis on the radio. Depressed after a hard day's work in a wartime munitions factory, she recalls that she wondered if she could go on:

There were air raids at night. The factory was dark and dirty. And I remember thinking—well—I must find somebody or something because like this I cannot go on. I stopped in the middle of Battersea Bridge one dreadful March night when it was cold, and the wind was howling over the bridge, and it was as dark as the pit, and I stood and leaned against the parapet and thought—like this I *cannot* go on. And it didn't come to me at once but some time afterwards I heard the broadcast talks of C.S. Lewis, and I at once grappled them to my soul, as Shakespeare says. And I used to assemble the family to hear because I thought that they were so good that even from the point of view of enjoyment people shouldn't miss them, and I got every word of his that I could, and I could see by hard argument there was only the one way for it. I had to be intellectually satisfied as well as emotionally because at that time of life one doesn't just fall into it in adolescent emotion, and I was satisfied at every point that it was the one way and the hard way to do things.⁹

Throughout her life she claimed the broadcast talks did much to deliver her from the despair she felt about to

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consume her as the war was coming to an end.

Lewis first began corresponding with Pitter in 1946. According to Pitter, she had sought an introduction through a mutual friend, Herbert Palmer. In spite of the fact that she was by this time an established poet, she recalls that in early July 1946 she wrote Lewis with “trepidation.” On July 13, 1946 Lewis replied with typical humor and gently mocked her being “trepidant” about meeting a middle aged don.¹⁰ After this first meeting, Pitter wrote Lewis on July 17, 1946:

I have hunted these out [*The Spirit Watches, A Mad Lady's Garland, and The Bridge*] wishing you to see something more recent than the “Trophy,” and particularly that you should see “A Mad Lady's Garland,” which though only grotesque & satirical (with the exception of “Fowls Celestial and Terrestrial,” included as a deliberate archaism) I think is my best & most original. Please keep the other two if you have a mind to them, but perhaps I may have the “Garland” back some time, as it is the only copy I have bar the American. My visit to you has discountenanced all the gypsy's warnings of people who say “never meet your favourite authors. They are so disappointing.”¹¹

In total, between July 1946 and August 1962 Lewis wrote Pitter sixty-three letters. Pitter had the foresight to keep his letters and in the late 1960's she deposited them in the Bodleian Library; in addition to Lewis's letters, she also included a journal in which she tried to recall the context of his letters (in one she writes: “Drat the man for destroying letters.”)¹²

Elsewhere I have reviewed the correspondence between Lewis and Pitter that focused upon poetry, so here I will highlight their other topics of discussion.¹³ Many of Lewis's letters attempt to arrange lunch meetings with Pitter and others. For instance, on Sept. 24, 1946, Lewis writes and invites her to lunch along with the Cecils and Hugo Dyson, who was a particular admirer of her poetry.¹⁴ Pitter, in recalling this luncheon, writes: “I remember at this lunch Mr. Dyson's saying ‘Can't we devise something that will get her here to Oxford?’ and feeling my chronic Jude-the-Obscure syndrome somewhat alleviated.”¹⁵ Later Lewis writes and regrets her having been in Oxford and their not being able to meet for lunch so they could read their poetry to each other (Aug. 13, 1949).¹⁶ A month later Lewis thanks her for a luncheon she gave him; he was particularly thankful for the delightful home grown fruit she provided but regretted he was unable to make friends with her cat, *Blitzkatze* (Sept. 22, 1949).¹⁷ Pitter recalls: “Lewis came with Owen Barfield to lunch in Chelsea . . . The ‘cornucopia’ allusion—it was autumn, and I had taken some trouble to bring from the

fruity Essex bower the richest specimens of grapes, pears, plums, & peaches: we arranged them on a large silver tray with sprays of vine-leaves, etc. The *Blitzkatze* was our cat.”¹⁸ While there is no way to establish with certainty the exact number of times Pitter and Lewis dined together during their friendship—always, it appears, with others also in attendance—it is safe to say such meetings ranged in the dozens.

Pitter's correspondence with Lewis touches on many other topics. For instance, on one occasion Pitter, knowing of Lewis's delight in grapes, sends him some from her own vines. Sadly, he is away when the grapes arrive. Pitter recalls: “I had noticed that Lewis had a special feeling about grapes. So have I. Of all fruits they are the most wholesome, grateful, beautiful, various: the plant is ‘*de tonte beaute,*’ the modest flower ravishing in scent: then there is wine . . . And most of all, the sacred associations & imagery. I had sent Lewis a sample of a specially highly flavoured grape . . . but the luck was out” (Sept. 26, 1948).¹⁹ In May 1953 Lewis congratulates Pitter on her new book *The Ermine*, noting that a number of the poems are subtle yet powerful affirmations of religious belief.²⁰ Pitter notes: “I suppose this was my first book after becoming a practicing Xtian. Does the change spoil a poet? I do not try to write anything explicitly Xtian, rather believing that all work (if good) is to the glory of God: though some people find fault with this attitude. One very good friend of mine, a truly pious farmer, challenged me on this subject. I *could* have retorted, “Well, why don't you sow ‘God is Love’ in radishes across your wheatfields, so that it can be read from the air?”²¹ Later the same year, in response to a request by Pitter, Lewis writes and for the first time addresses her as “Ruth” rather than “Miss Pitter”; in addition, for the first time he signs his letter “Jack.”²² Pitter writes: “I had now known Lewis for seven years (I had asked “if I might now have Rachel,” alluding to Jacob's seven-year service), and thought perhaps he would not mind if we now used Xtian names.”²³

Toward the end of 1953 Pitter moved from Chelsea to Long Crendon, a village only a short drive from Oxford. Although she entertained hopes of more frequent visits with Lewis, in fact his growing relationship with Joy Davidman mitigated against such hopes. On Jan. 26, 1954, Lewis arranges for the three of them to dine together at the Eastgate Hotel in Oxford; in her most terse journal entry, Pitter writes: “It was at this luncheon that I met Mrs. Gresham for the first and last time.”²⁴ In spite of Lewis's best intentions, there is no evidence the two women he most cared about ever warmed to the other.²⁵ Still, Lewis and Pitter continued to write. For example, prior to his move to accept a professorship at Cambridge, Pitter recalls: “On the eve of his translation to Cambridge I asked with spiteful relish what he was going to do to certain persons whose

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ideas I disliked (little as I knew them²⁶), and he replied that it was rather a question of what they would do to him” (Mar. 5, 1955).²⁷ During another visit to Pitter, Lewis scrupled to eat a pork pie she had prepared especially for him. Pitter notes: “I remember taking great pains to make a Raised Pork Pie, whose goodness surprised even myself, when Lewis was coming to lunch, only to find that he was reluctant to eat meat on a Friday (I had forgotten) and would hardly do more than taste it” (Mar. 19, 1955).²⁸ On Jan. 28, 1957, Lewis wrote Pitter about his wife’s cancer.²⁹ In her journal Pitter recalls:

I had of course seen the announcement of his marriage and (so tragically soon after) the news of his wife’s illness. Not being near enough to help practically (supposing this would have been acceptable) I thought it best not to bother him, except for an occasional brief message requiring no reply. I had been taught in youth that a woman’s friendship with a married man must be by grace and favour of his wife, and as Joy recovered and lived on so amazingly, I did from time to time write to her: but there was never any reply, so I decided to be thankful for this correspondence and friendship with so rare a creature as Lewis, and to leave it at that.³⁰

In addition to her journal recollections of the correspondence with Lewis, Pitter’s thoughts and feelings about Lewis are peppered throughout her correspondence to others and will be fascinating to readers seeking additional biographical information about him.

Arthur Wolseley Russell (1908-1990) was a BBC producer who not only produced a number of Pitter’s radio broadcasts but also became a close personal friend.³¹ Moreover, during the years of their friendship, Russell, who was a poet and lyricist, sent many of his poems to Pitter and asked for her critiques. In her second letter to Russell, Pitter writes: “Many thanks . . . for the poems, which I have read with real pleasure. I like the close forms and good workmanship, also the vivid observation. You certainly have a gift” (April 12, 1955).³² Her reference to his having a “gift” is the highest praise that she ever extends to the many people who sent her poems and asked for her opinion. In almost every letter Pitter writes to Russell (over 175) she offers specific critiques of poems he has sent. On Aug. 15, 1957 she writes: “The little ‘Truant’s Song’ is lovely. I would not have it different; it is like the midges’ flight, so delicate, really more poetical than the manly exercises. There is enough rhyme to content the ear, and the rest is like a silk scarf softly waved.”³³ Pitter, however, does more than simply praise Russell’s

work, offering constructive criticism as merited. In a discussion of epithets, Pitter writes: “Your epithets are always highly aware and usually choice and exact. But I do wonder whether you are getting too technical” (Oct. 22, 1960).³⁴

Countless other letters have a literary focus, often with Pitter reflecting on the state of modern British poetry, criticizing herself for her poetic inactivity or venting some of her frustrations with the direction of poetry publications. For instance, Pitter’s distaste for modern poetry in general and T. S. Eliot’s in particular was not simply reactionary. Indeed, she believed Eliot “had the gift,” and this was especially disturbing to her:

The Eliot part is ticklish. Here is a man, not English by birth, coming from far and bringing what is to me a strange and great disaster to that English poetry which is the treasure of humble and the spiritual flower of a very great people, taking it away from the common man (whom he quite unconsciously but quite evidently despises) and making it the province of the few, and the snobbish few at that. This is quite horrible, and yet here also is a man, a kind, good, and much-afflicted man, who is my fellow-Christian and my old acquaintance . . . The conflict in me is real and fierce. If he were no poet there would be no conflict, but he has the gift, and this fact makes the battle in me one of angels and demons. I truly think him wrong, and my own spirit of unforgiveness (my besetting sin) keeps me on the horns of the dilemma which only charity can resolve. When I accosted him at the bus-stop (on the one day of many months that I was in London) it was an act of contrition on my part as much as a gesture of high spirits. It was not a light thing to me at all, though I laughed at it, and his positively gay aplomb, courteous kindness, and lighthearted disregard of being in the crowded street, were all very good. When I lived in Chelsea I often met him at the early Communion service at the Old Church. Something is here for tears, and I don’t understand it yet. (Aug. 24, 1955)³⁵

About her own writing lethargy, she says: “There has been nothing doing in my literary life, except the inevitable wedges of bad poetry now & then, but . . . I have been trying to write poetry by will-power. I doubt if it’s any good, but Arthur, there’s one thing about the mere trying: the stuff runs in your head so that at least you are engaged in it, and all the time it runs it’s shedding various impurities” (Mar. 19, 1962).³⁶ About difficulties Russell is encountering in getting his own poetry into print, Pitter reflects: “It’s horribly

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depressing now, the way poetry has to sneak in unheralded. Oh, wasn't it lovely when all the toshing little books got their prompt review, and never a harsh word either . . . 'Miss Pitter's dainty lays (or even fairy chimes) would make the most delightful Christmas present. . . . such value at 3/6, too.' Now they lump us all together, a dozen in a ¼ column, six months late, if we're lucky. The thankless Muse" (Nov. 16, 1965).³⁷

Other letters offer wonderfully detailed verbal pictures of events in her life. After a fall in which she broke her left wrist, she had to pay regular visits to the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford, and she draws a vivid picture of the place: "I've been paying a weekly visit to Casualty at the Radcliffe; goodness, it is old-fashioned there still. One has to walk in past the mortuary, and coffins are whisked by quite briskly, owing no doubt to all the traffic accidents. The porter lounges on a bench, just like Hogarth's 'Gin Lane,' with one of the peculiarly acrid, gritty old Oxford whores draped round him in broad daylight; interns row over pinched blankets, etc., people are carried past moaning, and babies pee on the floor" (June 16, 1962).³⁸ In 1971 Pitter wrote a mystery play in six episodes that came to be performed annually by members of her local parish church. Three years later she writes Russell about the preparation for this play, offering insight into the characters of some of the performers:

We have just finished the run of our "mystery" plays; I have been trying to get to as many rehearsals as possible in order to catch faults due to not quite understanding the old texts, etc., and also I was nabbed to take the part of a neighbour who died. It was quite respectable in the end, and the music was A1, being all mediaeval (due to musically learned vicar), but a number of the leading parts were nabbed at the very outset three seasons ago by amateur actors, all conceit and no talents; I am afraid nothing but death will shift them, and they kill their parts stone dead. The way to cast these things is to watch the village for the right types, then persecute them until they agree to try. I never imagined people could be so childishly vain and blind. At least one gets to know a few of the facts of life. (May 15, 1974)³⁹

Regarding the return of spring, she writes: "Toads mating in ponds; you could see them coming through the undergrowth, their eyes shinning, waiting till there were no humans about. They get very ratty if one interferes—I've seen them get up on all fours and rush at one, croaking desperately" (April 26, 1975).⁴⁰

Many of her letters to Russell also thank him for arranging her appearances on numerous BBC Radio

programs such as the Woman's Hour and London Calling Asia. After one appearance, she writes Russell:

I'm not surprised that I sounded brighter on "Woman's Hour." It is the Light Programme, and they do their utmost to keep it bright; rather too much, I think. Then their method, treating the day's programme rather like a big newspaper, getting everyone together for final rehearsal & lunch, & broadcasting everything live as far as possible—this means that everyone knows everyone else and rather a party atmosphere is developed. But also there is the fact that I'm getting more at home with the mike. (Oct. 17, 1956)⁴¹

Later on, in part through Russell's influence, Pitter appears on the BBC Television program, the Brains Trust—the first talk show. After one appearance, Russell writes: "We enjoyed your Brains Trust—never watch except when you're on; it's such a silly way of spending a *fine* Sunday afternoon, anyway!⁴² But you always make it worth while. The girls thought you looked rather horsey in your tweed and check shirt and tie; I thought the make-up girls hadn't got your wavelength as well as usual; they gave your face a slight air of a Chinese portrait. Your contribution as always delightful" (May 26, 1957).⁴³ She responds two days later:

Oh, *thank* you for saying I looked all right. The make-up is very skilful, of course—mine was a Light Street—and I had slept in a hairnet the night before, so I felt fairly assured—but you never know what the camera will do. I like B[ernard]. Braden no end. He has a lovely face close up, with an expression as though he were listening to lovely music. J[ulian]. Huxley has got to the burbling stage—he did it at lunch—but I was glad to see him again for old times' sake. [John] Betjeman I know a little & love a lot. Prof. [A. J.] Ayer is reacting against Calvinism, he told me so, without seeming to realize the implications.⁴⁴

Their friendship led her to ask him to serve as the producer of audio recordings in which she read her poetry for Louis Untermeyer for the Library of Congress in 1962.⁴⁵ In addition, Russell was invaluable to Pitter during a severe illness in 1965 when he worked with her publisher, Cresset Press, to see that her corrections to the galley proofs were incorporated before the final manuscript of *Still by Choice* (1966) went to press. On July 23, 1965 she writes Russell from her hospital bed: "No, send the pp. proofs straight back to the Cresset, & as *soon as possible*: my mind is in no

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condition for them after the new op[eration] (for the abscess). Much obliged for service wh. I know I can depend on.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, he was the editor and the driving force behind the publication of the *festschrift*, *Ruth Pitter: Homage to a Poet* (1969). In one of her last letters to Russell, she thanks him for his recent letter and comments on her physical condition: “I can’t complain. I have had a great time, but I would be glad to be gone now: 89 is too long to be hanging about—and I suspect I have become an awful old bore” (Jan. 28, 1986).⁴⁷ While Pitter served as a willing mentor and an excellent sounding board for Russell, in turn he assisted Pitter in getting her regular work on the BBC; perhaps more valuable, he worked tirelessly to promote her poetry, culminating in the *festschrift*, *Ruth Pitter: Homage to a Poet*.

Stylistically Pitter’s letters are marked by crisp prose, precise imagery, and elegant simplicity. While on a number of occasions she laments her lack of a university education, her letters reflect a vigorous mind—lithe, curious, penetrating, analytical, and perceptive. To tradesmen or tax assessors, she is polite, curt, business-like, and when necessary, hard nosed. On Oct. 3, 1959, she writes to her milk supplier:

Dear Sir, The milk we buy . . . has never been really fresh, but just lately it has been definitely stale, and moreover, it has a taste and an odor of something added, something that spoils tea or anything else the milk is used for. It goes bad in less than a day, and I mean bad in the sense of putrid, not honestly sour—properly sour milk can be used in several ways; this cannot be used. Today, when I used the “top milk” from yesterday’s delivery to add to a sweet dish, this proved uneatable. The roundsman said everyone, including his own wife, was complaining, and that he thought the trouble (apart from the perennial staleness) was due to new orders from “headquarters”, whatever that may mean, to rinse cans with a special solution which was *not* to be washed off before milk was put in. May I have your views?⁴⁸

To admirers of her verse, she is humble, appreciative and patient. For example, she writes to John Mansfield, the Poet Laureate, on July 15, 1955: “It was with great delight that I learned from your letter of yesterday that Her Majesty the Queen will herself present the Gold Medal for Poetry. I shall feel that this award, made by the Sovereign in person, is the greatest and most apt honour (undeserved as I must feel it) that could be offered to one who for over half a century has endeavoured to write English poetry for pure love of it.”⁴⁹

To her many BBC contacts, she is generous with her time, eager to please, and ever available. She writes one of her producers on July 11, 1960: “Yes, I should very much like to take part in the series ‘In Praise of Virtue.’ I suggest one that is not often thought of now; the virtue of *Frugality*. When one comes to think of it, we have unequalled opportunities for this virtue now; in the past, bitter, necessary economy too often obscured it. As an alternative, I suggest *Self-Control*; this is really commoner now than it used to be, I think, but I may have a slightly new angle.”⁵⁰ To her personal friends, she is genuine, open, and winsome. To one admirer she writes:

Very many thanks for your 2 wonderful letters . . . What a lot you seem to have experienced and to know! This is such a contrast to my own life—I tell everyone I am still poring over the weed at the back door, but all the same I gobble all the news about the cosmos. I see the Black Holes are on again tonight. With Space Shuttles, Moonshots, etc., I have no patience. Mother would have said “You can’t go out there to play until you have cleared up the mess you have made in here.” (Nov. 16, 1981)⁵¹

To Mary Cooley, an American friend who sent Pitter countless “care package” during and after WWII, she reflects on the death of Sir Winston Churchill:

The news of Churchill’s death is scarcely 3 hours old, as I write to you . . . I wonder where humanity would have stood at this moment but for him? Massive and diverse as our troubles are, they might have been so incomparably worse but for that towering man. We remember so well the open, direct impact of his wartime broadcasts, which made us feel, not a suffering civilian population but people under fire, people on active service. But a flesh-and-blood hero, not an iron war lord. I’ve never forgotten, at the very worst time, his words of pity for “poor little typists, thinly clad, waiting endlessly at bus stops” in hard winter weather. And so grimly humorous—what a relish there was to that. “Some chicken! Some neck!” He was a red haired man when he had any hair. Ginger for pluck.⁵² (Jan. 25, 1965)

There is nothing brittle about her personality, and she never engages in self-pity, even though the circumstances of her life provided plenty of opportunities for distress.

At the same time, she veils certain aspects of her

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emotional life, particularly early failed love affairs. While she does sometimes speak of these matters, it is always in third person—a convenient way of avoiding a direct psychological exploration of her emotions. One example comes from an interview with John Wain on March 29, 1968:

I felt that instinctively from the first [that I would never marry], you know. I would look at the boy next door and I would look at young men one met in the course of one's work, and one would say to one's self that they are simply not relevant. One might be very fond of them, but one would realize that, as I always say it would be cruelty to animals to marry them, because there was always this ruling passion, this major preoccupation, in which the poor dears had no share. Of course once one had made a little money one could have married middle-aged men very easily. The moment a single woman has got a little money, she has to look out for herself. In fact, I was always very firm. I never had the slightest illusion about that sort of set-up.⁵³

On the other hand, her genuine affection for Kathleen O'Hara, Pitter's friend, business partner, and living companion for more than a half-century, appears frequently. Like many young women in post World War I England, they faced bleak prospects for marriage; their decision to live together, therefore, was driven by practical, economic, and work-related concerns.

In conclusion, of Pitter's more than one thousand letters covering the years 1908-1988, I have cited only a very few in this essay. While I have emphasized here her correspondence with David Cecil, C.S. Lewis, and Arthur Russell, space limits me from noting her letters about George Orwell (she knew him as Eric Blair, before his later fame as a novelist), the Irish poet George Russell (a.k.a. AE; he was most certainly romantically smitten by her), and the British poet, Dorothy Wellesley (irascible but devoted to verse). Of course many other letters contain trivial matters, including detailed travel arrangement to and from London and business matters of little interest. At the same time, much of her BBC correspondence, consisting primarily of short notes confirming bookings and recording sessions, throws light on her charming tenacity as well as her easy flexibility when it came to radio and television production matters. In summary, all these letters go a long way toward illustrating Pitter's desire to reach a public interested in her as both a poet and personal commentator. Moreover, even though Pitter was not a dedicated diarist, the few diary entries I have discovered and a number interviews conducted primarily on BBC radio between 1955 and 1977, along

with her correspondence, offer readers important biographical material. These documents are a first stage in understanding "the silent music, the dance in stillness, the hints and echoes and messages of which everything is full" reflected in her life and poetry. In total they provide an essential introduction to the work of this neglected twentieth-century poet.

Notes

¹ That she continues to be enjoyed by readers is evidenced by *The Faber Book of 20th Century Women's Poetry*, Ed. Flew Adcock (London: Faber & Faber, 1987) where her "The Sparrow's Skull" and "Morning Glory" (pp. 77-78) appear; *More Poetry Please! 100 Popular Poems from the BBC Radio 4 Programme* (London: Everyman, 1988) where her "The Rude Potato" (pp. 101-02) appears; *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English*, 2nd edition. Eds. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York: Norton, 1996 [1985]) where her "The Military Harpist," "The Irish Patriarch," "Old Nelly's Birthday," and "Yorkshire Wife's Saga" (pp. 1573-77) appear; and *The New Penguin Book of English Verse*, Ed. Paul Keegan (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 2000) where her "But for Lust" (p. 962) appears.

² In chronological order they are: *First Poems*. London: Cecil Palmer, 1920; *First and Second Poems*. London: Sheed & Ward, 1927; *Persephone in Hades*. Privately printed, 1931; *A Mad Lady's Garland*. London: Cresset Press, 1934; *A Trophy of Arms: Poems 1926-1935*. London: Cresset Press, 1936. (winner of the Hawthornden Prize in 1937); *The Spirit Watches*. London: Cresset Press, 1939; *The Rude Potato*. London: Cresset Press, 1941; *Poem*. Southampton: Shirley Press, 1943; *The Bridge: Poems 1939-1944*. London: Cresset Press, 1945; *Pitter on Cats*. London: Cresset Press, 1946; *Urania* (Selections from *A Trophy of Arms*, *The Spirit Watches*, and *The Bridge*). London: Cresset Press, 1950; *The Ermine: Poems 1942-1952*. London: Cresset Press, 1953. (winner of the Wm. Heinemann Award: Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry, 1955); *Still by Choice*. London: Cresset Press, 1966; *Poems 1926-1966*. London: Barrie & Rockcliff/Cresset Press, 1968; *End of the Drought*. London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1975; *A Heaven to Find*. London: Enitharmon, 1987; *Collected Poems: 1990*. Petersfield: Enitharmon, 1990 (rev. 1996).

³ Critical evaluations of her poetry have always been favorable. In the "Preface" to Pitter's *First and Second Poems* (1927), Hilaire Belloc praises her

poetry as “an exceptional reappearance of the classical spirit amongst us” (7). He likens her verse to a strong stone building and argues really good verse “contrasted with the general run of that in the midst of which it appears, seems to me to have a certain quality of *hardness* [Belloc’s emphasis]; so that, in the long run, it will be discovered, as a gem is discovered in mud” (9). In her poetry he finds “beauty and right order” (10). Belloc also writes in the “Preface” to her *A Mad Lady’s Garland* (1934) that Pitter has two peculiar poetic gifts: “A perfect ear and exact epithet. How those two ever get combined is incomprehensible—one would think it was never possible—but when the combination does appear then you have verse of that classic sort which is founded and secure of its own future” (vii). In his *Four Living Poets* (1944), Rudolph Gilbert calls Pitter “the poet of purity” and notes “what the poetry reader values most in Pitter’s poems is her eloquence . . . In Pitter one almost looks through the language, as through air, discerning the exact form of the objects which stand there, and every part and shade of meaning is brought out by the sunny light resting upon them” (48-49). Later he adds: “She has a first-rate intuitive gift of observation, a control of poetic language and magical perception that is always to found in great poetry” (52). C.S. Lewis, who carried on an extensive correspondence with Pitter about poetry, often lavished praise on her verse. For example, he writes: “*Trophy of Arms* [1936] is enough for one letter for it has most deeply delighted me. I was prepared for the more definitely mystical poems, but not for this cool, classical quality. You do it time after time—create a silence and vacancy and awe all round the poem. If the Lady in *Comus* had written poetry one imagines it wd. have been rather like this” (July 19, 1946; cited in Don W. King, *C.S. Lewis, Poet: The Legacy of His Poetic Impulse*, 226-27.).

Pitter’s literary admirers eventually published the *festschrift*, *Ruth Pitter: Homage to a Poet* (1969). There Lord David Cecil says “she is the most moving of living English poets, and one of the most original” (13). John Arlott refers to her as “a poet’s poet” (43), while Thom Gunn notes she “is the most modest of poets, slipping us her riches as if they were everyday currency” (64). Kathleen Raine is more lavish in her praise: “I now see her as one of the poets whose best work will survive as long as the English language, with whose expressiveness in image and idea she has kept faith, remains” (106). Other writers who praised Pitter in this volume included Edmund Blunden,

Andrew Young, John Betjeman, Richard Church, Roy Fuller, Elizabeth Jennings, Carolyn Kizer, Dame Ngaio Marsh, Robin Skelton, Hallam Tennyson, John Wain, and John Hall Wheelock. Furthermore, Philip Larkin who edited the *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* (1973) included four of her poems, noting that her poetry was “rather good” (“Letter to Judy Egerton,” March 16, 1969, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, 412-13). Larkin’s praise is noteworthy since he, like Pitter, wrote poetry in the vein of other traditional English poets such as Thomas Hardy and A. E. Housman. Even after her death, critically praise has continued. In the “Introduction” to Pitter’s *Collected Poems* (1996), Elizabeth Jennings appreciates her “acute sensibility and deep integrity”; her poems “are informed with a sweetness which is also bracing, and a generosity which is blind to nothing, neither the sufferings in this world nor the quirky behavior of human beings” (15).

⁴ Pitter and Kathleen O’Hara operated Deane and Forester, a small firm that specialized in decorative furniture. O’Hara was Pitter’s lifelong friend, business partner, and living companion.

⁵ Pitter’s correspondence with her friend, Mary E. Cooley, is also substantial. Instead of having a literary focus, however, it is personal in nature. Readers will be most interested in the letters during and immediately after World War II as Cooley sent Pitter regular food parcels to supplement the strict rationing in force in England. In addition, Pitter’s correspondence to Hilaire Belloc from 1923 to 1936 reveals significant insights into her thoughts on writing and publishing poetry.

⁶ Edward Christian David (Gascoyne) Cecil. Fellow of Wadham College, Oxford, 1924-1930. Fellow of New College, 1939-1969 (emeritus fellow 1970-1986). Goldsmith Professor of English Literature, 1948-1969.

⁷ Pitter letters to Cecil family used by permission of the Bodleian Library and Mark Pitter. The majority of Pitter’s letters may be found in thirty seven boxes of uncatalogued Pitter material held by the Bodleian. A manuscript containing over 800 Pitter letters, *Silent Music: The Letters of Ruth Pitter*, is under review for publication by Kent State UP.

⁸ Cecil family letters to Ruth Pitter used by permission of Laura Cecil.

⁹ BBC Interview with Stephen Black, June 24, 1955. Used by permission.

¹⁰ Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, Fol. 17.

¹¹ This is the only letter Pitter wrote Lewis known to have survived. I discovered it on April 11, 1997,

stuck between the pages of Lewis's personal copy of Pitter's *The Spirit Watches* in the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission.

¹² Below I include Pitter's journal recollections of these letters as well as short summaries of Lewis's letters.

¹³ For more on their correspondence about poetry, see "The Poetry of Prose: C.S. Lewis, Ruth Pitter, and *Perelandra*," *Christianity and Literature* 49 (Spring 2000): 331-56 and *C.S. Lewis, Poet: The Legacy of His Poetic Impulse* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State UP, 2001), pp. 14-16, 224-37. For a more detailed discussion of her overall correspondence with and about Lewis, see "The Anatomy of a Friendship: The Correspondence of Ruth Pitter and C.S. Lewis, 1946-1962." *Mythlore* 24 (Summer 2003): 2-24.

¹⁴ Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, Fol. 29.

¹⁵ Pitter journal, Sept. 27, 1946, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, Fol. 30.

¹⁶ Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, Fol. 71.

¹⁷ Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, Fol. 80.

¹⁸ Pitter journal, Sept. 22, 1949, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, Fol. 81. Of another meeting, this time between Barfield, Pitter, and Lewis, Barfield writes Pitter on Sept. 25, 1949: "I hope you and Jack kept it up well into the small hours, capping carryout with carryout, besting ballade with ballade, vying in virelays and triumphing with triolets. Isn't he terrific company?" The excerpts from Owen Barfield's letters to Pitter are found in her uncatalogued papers at the Bodleian Library.

¹⁹ Pitter journal, Sept. 26, 1948, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, Fol. 60.

²⁰ Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 115.

²¹ Pitter journal, May 12 & 15, 1953, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 117. Readers interested in Lewis's impact on Pitter's spiritual life will find many of her other letters commenting upon his influence. For instance, in a letter of Jan. 1, 1948, Pitter writes Nettie Palmer, offering additional insight into her conversion:

Did I tell you I'd taken to Christianity?

Yes, I went & got confirmed a year ago or more. I was driven to it by the pull of C.S. Lewis and the push of misery. Straight prayer book Anglican, nothing fancy . . . I realize what a tremendous thing it is to take on, but I can't imagine turning back. It cancels a great many of one's miseries at once, of course: but it brings great liabilities, too. (Palmer Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 1174. All excerpts

used by permission.)

In addition, in an interview with Hilary Smith on March 24, 1964, Pitter says:

[My conversion to Christianity] was fairly sudden; everything happened together as it does you know. I went through all the fancy religions at second hand because my mother went in for them. But then I became rather Julian Huxley, scientific-humanistic—very typical young thing to be, and I thought all this religion, how could it be true? But then after having been in some tribulation and some danger and some unfamiliar surroundings, I began to be very much cut up about all these things and finding life dreadfully stressful. And then I heard a series of broadcasts by C.S. Lewis. That started me on the road anyway. I think he undermined one in a many great directions, but my humanistic citadel did not fall until I was incautious enough to go to some lectures on fundamental philosophical principles. I there met Newman's Doctrine of Assent, I think it is called. Newman said in effect that if you believe a thing you must act upon it. There I was up against the decision, so I decided and went off into the Church of England where I had been baptized long years before. And it was a great disappointment to me in a way; I had wrong ideas. I thought I had been such a stranger to churches for such a long time, [and] I thought I had only to turn to any church to meet a George Herbert or somebody on that level. And I thought I should be parting with part of my freedom, but I shall be under direction. When I found that parson was a stuffed shirt and the people were there only in the sense that the old stones in the wall were there, I realized that it was on one's own contribution that the whole thing depended. This was very unpalatable. I am still wondering what one could do about it?

²² Lewis tells Pitter he has been ready for some time to use first names, but he has been waiting for the initiative to come from Pitter. He also adds that her pending move to Long Crendon is delightful, noting that Barfield used to live there so her presence will give it a good second association. He calls it a lovely village and relays Warnie's welcome as well (Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 118).

²³ Pitter Journal, Oct. 3, 1953, Bodleian Library, MS.

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- Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 119.
- ²⁴ Pitter Journal, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 123.
- ²⁵ The icy relationship between Davidman and Pitter is not surprising. Indeed, in the Bodleian Library there remains sealed correspondence between Pitter and Walter Hooper, Lewis's literary executor, which may reveal further evidence of Pitter's disaffection for Davidman; however, this correspondence may not be opened until the death of Joy's sons, David and Douglas Gresham. While the exact nature of this correspondence will fall to future scholars to uncover, I believe that Pitter, motivated by an understandable but inexcusable bitterness, convinced herself that Joy used her illness (bone cancer) to manipulate Lewis into marrying her. Pitter writes about this in a curious document that I date in the mid-1970's, "The Alabaster Box, or This Awful Power." Pitter's restricted papers in the Bodleian Library.
- ²⁶ Based on what Pitter says in other places, I think she has in mind here F. R. Leavis.
- ²⁷ Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 128. Based on what Pitter says in other places, I think she has in mind here F. R. Leavis.
- ²⁸ Pitter Journal, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 130.
- ²⁹ Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 141.
- ³⁰ Pitter Journal, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 142.
- ³¹ Russell worked as a freelance journalist in London from 1930 until joining the BBC as a sub-editor in the Empire News department in February 1935. He held a number of similar posts before moving in 1951 into production on the program, London Calling Asia. From 1960 to 1964 he was a producer in Overseas Talks & Features. He published four volumes of poetry: *In Idleness of Air* (1960), *Ice on the Live Rail* (1962), *New and Vanishing Delight* (1975), and *River Jumping with Kids* (1986). He was also a freelance poetry reviewer for publications such as *The Daily Telegraph*.
- ³² Pitter's letters to Russell are available in the British Library. Add 70721. Fol. 2. Used by permission.
- ³³ British Library. Add 70721. Fol. 63.
- ³⁴ Fol. 104.
- ³⁵ Fols. 9-10.
- ³⁶ Fol. 109.
- ³⁷ Fol. 124.
- ³⁸ Fol. 110.
- ³⁹ Fol. 168.
- ⁴⁰ Fol. 180.
- ⁴¹ Fol. 45.
- ⁴² BBC Television. The Brains Trust. May 26, 1957. Producer John Furness. Bernard Braden, Question Master. Guests: Dr. Julian Huxley, Professor A. J. Ayer, Ruth Pitter, and John Betjeman. A copy of this script is available in the BBC Written Archives.
- ⁴³ The British Library. Add 70722. Fol. 22.
- ⁴⁴ The British Library. Add 70721. Fol. 58.
- ⁴⁵ In cooperation with the Library of Congress, I have secured a CD version of these recordings.
- ⁴⁶ The British Library. Add 70722. Fol. 120.
- ⁴⁷ Fol. 212.
- ⁴⁸ Uncatalogued Pitter papers, Bodleian Library.
- ⁴⁹ Uncatalogued papers.
- ⁵⁰ Uncatalogued Pitter papers, BBC Written Archives.
- ⁵¹ Uncatalogued Pitter papers, Bodleian Library.
- ⁵² "Ruth Pitter Letters to Mary Cooley." Mary E. Cooley Papers, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.
- ⁵³ BBC Radio. Third Programme. "Ruth Pitter Talks to John Wain." Recorded on March 29, 1968. Transmitted on Oct. 31, 1968. Produced by Hallam Tennyson. A copy of the script is available at the BBC Written Archives.

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