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Sister Penelope Lawson CSMV:
Her Life, Writings and Legacy
by Richard James

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This essay is the nuts and bolts of the oral presentation I made at the 2016 C.S. Lewis and Friends Conference at Taylor University on the life, writings and legacy of Sister Penelope Lawson. I do not discuss in detail two important things that most devotees of Lewis already know: the important twenty-four year correspondence between Sister Penelope and C.S. Lewis found in Volumes Two and Three of his collected letters and his important feedback and help in getting her first translation, On The Incarnation by Athanasius, published by Geoffrey Bles, beginning for her an amazing string of translations. Since 1996, two very good essays by Clara Sarrocco (2000) and Will Vaus (2009) have already covered their correspondence, and two additional informative biographical summaries have been written by Walter Hooper (1998, 2004). These letters, these four essays, and Sister Penelope’s own spiritual autobiography, The Meditations of a Caterpillar (1962) are a basic foundation for anyone who desires to delve further into the contributions that this one Anglican nun has made to the understanding, translation and promotion of the Christian faith. Visual context for a study of Sister Penelope and St. Mary’s Convent is provided by Vaus on his blog, The Lamppost, where he posted several photographs after he had visited the convent back in 2009. I used some of these with Will’s permission in my own presentation.

My purpose in this essay though is to focus more specifically on some of the things about her that have not been shared previously. By doing this, perhaps others will by my example seek to discover even more of the treasures found in her life and work. I start with something that was for me very important yet difficult to find—a contemporary obituary from 1977. Knowing the dates of her birth (20 Mar 1890) and death (15 May 1977) from reading the above mentioned articles and knowing also from Walter Hooper’s comments that she had written virtually hundreds of uncollected book reviews for several periodicals, I began to search. I finally did find one obituary of her, but only one, in the Anglo-Catholic weekly, Church Times. Titled, “Sister Penelope: A Nun with a Literary Bent,” the first column is printed below:
Sister Penelope, a member of the Community of St. Mary the Virgin who achieved a modest fame through her devotional writings, died at Wantage last Sunday, aged eighty-seven. She was born on March 20, 1890, and professed in the Community on March 25, 1915. Her father was a priest and she was educated at the Alice Ottley School, Worcester, and took her degree at Oxford. She was always considered delicate, and, apart from eleven years of teaching in the Community’s schools at the beginning of her professed life, lived mainly at the convent or at St. Michael’s House, Wantage, doing librarian or literary work. Her first book, The Wood, was published in 1935.

The last two columns contain some personal reflections by Robin Denniston, Chairman of Mowbray’s Publishing Company which had published many of her books. He writes of her as “a delightful friend” who “wrote long letters on odd bits of paper about a multitude of matters.” Three of his sentences especially impressed me as a helpful summary of Sister Penelope’s life and as a way of pointing to her greater purpose:

In her religion she was a true Tractarian—High but not ridiculously so, self-disciplined, learned and companionable. In her writing she was fluent but not facile. Her books—though quite popular in tone—were all the fruit of great reading and considerable knowledge, particularly of the Early Church.

He ends by connecting and comparing her to her friend C.S. Lewis and saying that “It is sad that there are few like them today!” (20 May 1977, p. 3)

Personally it surprised me that for an author of her accomplishment, no other periodicals or national newspapers, secular or religious, either in the U.K. or the U.S., had even mentioned her death. Also adding to my frustration, and noted also by Denniston and Hooper, is that her religious community’s policy until the mid-1960’s was not to use either first names or surnames on the works by any of their sisters, but to put on the title page merely the phrases “a member of” or “a religious of CSMV” (Community of St. Mary the Virgin). They did eventually start using the first names only with CSMV, assuming that there was only one person with that name in each community.

I had previously read Lewis’s letters to her in both editions of Warren Lewis’s compilation of his letters (1966, 1988) and had also seen her mentioned several times in Green and Hooper’s biography of
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Lewis (1974), in Hooper’s pictorial account (1982), and then in others like Sayers (1988, 1994), and Wilson (1990). But these had mentioned little about her life other than that she was an Anglican religious whom Lewis had befriended. The only book of hers that I had at the time was her translation of *On the Incarnation*. But surely there would have been more to her life than what is mentioned in the letters and in one short obituary.

As it turns out, there was; I just did not know where to find it. I found the first indication of this more in 2003 when I read Perry Bramblett’s 2000 report of his finding a “dirt cheap prize” in an “old junk bookshop” in Suffolk, Virginia. He had found and bought a used copy of Sister Penelope’s book, *The Wood* (1971). With the notes on the dust jacket, there was a flyleaf photograph of her and a brief description of her life and writings (*The Lewis Legacy*, no. 83, p. 3). This same flyleaf photo and history I also found recently on the dust jacket of a copy of this same book while doing research at The University of the South. Incredibly, when the request came to her from the Episcopal Book Club of the United States for a fourth edition, at age eighty-one, she had seen it through with what she called only “sundry obvious updating and minor corrections.” Below is part of that flyleaf personal history:

Sister Penelope was born in 1890 at Clent in Worcestershire, where her father was Vicar. She was educated first at Worcester, under Miss Ottley, at what is now the Alice Ottley School, then at Oxford.

She entered the novitiate of the Anglican Community of St Mary the Virgin at Wantage in Berkshire a few weeks after coming down from Oxford, and was professed there early in 1915.

She worked for six years in the Community’s training homes for girls before being put to teach in the schools in Wantage and elsewhere….

In 1939 she took the Lambeth Diploma in Theology by theses, offering the Hebrew text of the Psalms as her special subject; and the following year she received the Archbishop’s License to teach Theology.

She has written a number of other books… and she has also published some sixteen translations, including a volume apiece in the Ancient Christian Writers series, Faber’s Classics of the Contemplative Life, and the Cistercian Fathers now being published by the Trappists in America.
After reading more about Sister Penelope in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, Volume II*, I began in June of 2004 to enlarge my library of her books. By July of 2005, I owned twenty-one of her books, mostly bought from used book dealers on the internet, thus expanding my knowledge and appreciation for this gifted woman's ability to write in many different genres. She spoke to me as a biblical theologian, a church historian, a devotional writer, a biographer, a dramatist, a translator of the Greek and Latin Church Fathers, an essayist, and a book reviewer.

Her writings, in all their forms, were a lot to take in, even with my seminary training. As a conservative evangelical, I struggled some with her inclusion of the literary critical approach to the scriptures, especially in the Old Testament that she had learned from her studies of the work of S.R. Driver, a respected British Old Testament scholar. But like him, she was very strong in her orthodox Christian beliefs, often expressing to her readers that her scholarly study of the Bible had not discredited or made her faith untenable. In her opinion “the higher criticism of the Old Testament has rendered untold service to theology,” and she had gained from it immensely (*The Wood*, pp. vii-viii, 7).

In the fall of 2007 I traveled to North Carolina to attend a C.S. Lewis conference at Wake Forest and while there spent about a week doing research on some of the books from the personal library of C.S. Lewis at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. Also, I had opportunity to view some of the letters related to C.S. Lewis and his friends, including some from Sister Penelope, which Walter Hooper had deposited there.

Then, in the summer of 2011, I began a brief correspondence with Sister Patricia Ann, the Sister Archivist at C.S.M.V. in Wantage. I asked her if she could share with me a bibliography of Sister Penelope's work, possibly a photo of her, and some information on her life and her responsibilities at Wantage. She quickly answered my email, but informed me that it would take some time for her to find the information that I had requested.

It was truly a blessing one month later to receive a very long email from Sister Patricia Ann all about Sister Penelope and a promised photograph and more through the regular mail. Included were the “potted history” shared above from *The Wood* and a list of known books and pamphlets written or translated by Sister Penelope, most of which by now I already knew. But there were two new things sent in addition to the promised photograph. First, she shared with me two poems by

*inkleings_forever*
Sister Penelope from two books of poems that had been published by Mowbrays: *Wantage Poems* (1966) and *More Wantage Poems* (1971). When I read Will Vaus’s essay in 2014, I noticed that at the end of his paper he had quoted “Behold We Go Up,” from the second book, but not “Perseverance in Prayer,” her poem in the first book (p. 44). Here is that poem, presented with permission of Sister Patricia Ann.

“Perseverance in Prayer”

Ask, seek, importune again,
Though futile seem thy prayer and vain.
By seeking and by asking, so
More capable thy soul shall grow
Those very gifts to take and use
Which now His wisdom doth refuse.
God wills not all at once to shed
His every blessing on thine head:
But keeps in store, that thou mayest learn
Greatly for greatest gifts to yearn.

Also, I discovered that it was from this same first book of poems that Sister Patricia Ann had sent me the following further biographical information about Sister Penelope.

Sister Penelope read German and Theology at Oxford. Shortly after coming down from Oxford, she joined the Community. In 1915 she made her life Profession. She taught in the Community’s schools between 1918 and 1931. She began to write and translate as “A Religious of C.S.M.V.” in 1932 after she had been invalided home. From 1934 to 1944 she was Community Librarian and during this time she obtained the Lambeth Diploma in Theology. (p. 44)

The remainder of this essay contains what I consider to be the most extensive bibliography available on the published work of Sister Penelope. I have listed these within the following categories in chronological order: essays, book reviews, poems, plays, pocket books and mini books, books and translations. Secondary works cited are listed following her bibliography.

Following the bibliographies is a chart showing six generations of Sister Penelope’s family tree. To my knowledge, nothing like this was available when I first started my work on this paper. Even in earlier articles about her, the only other family members mentioned were her mother, Laura Penelope Anstice and her father, Rev. Frederick R. Lawson. In her spiritual biography, *Meditations of a Caterpillar*, Sister
Penelope does mention that her father was of Yorkshire and Lowland Scotland descent, but was born and raised in Worcestershire. But she shared little else about her family (pp. 20, 22).

Looking at this tree, our view of Sister Penelope’s family broadens, and we see also all her grandparents, all her great-grandparents, 75% of her great-great-grandparents and 62.5% of her great-great-great-grandparents. From great military and religious leaders on her father’s side to the great industrial and literary leaders on her mother’s side. They come from Scotland and India, from Somerset and Shropshire, and of course, Worcester. I know who each person listed is and their place in her life, but my space has already been used for other important things shared in the text above. If you have a question about anyone and you cannot find them on the internet yourself, please contact me. The small photo in the upper left corner is a reduced copy of the photograph sent to me by Sister Patricia Ann, Sister Archivist, C.S.M.V. to use in my presentation. Also, if you find an error in this family tree or know a name that should be added in one of the empty slots, please contact me at rvjames@kih.net.

Looking back over the life of Sister Penelope, it is important to note that at the age of forty-two her life took a turn for which Sister Penelope had not planned. As noted above, one source tells us that she was invalided and had to stop doing that for which she had been trained—teaching at the schools in her religious community. Not much is ever said about the specific details. But whatever it was, she and her community took it as an opportunity for her to change her primary vocation from teaching to writing books related to her faith and its history and to translate into English from Greek and Latin, some of the great writings of the early church fathers and the later medieval monastics.

And for that change all who desire to grow in the knowledge of their faith and in their relationship with Christ can be thankful for all the writing that she did over the next 42 years in so many different fields of study and through so many different genres. I marvel at how she was able to communicate so much so clearly in such a short space given to her to review books for both Church Times and View Review. And, on top of all of that she wrote and published, she was still doing it effectively into her mid-80’s. Her work is excellent, but she herself is an even greater testimony to how God can still use us no matter what our age or situation may be, if we will only choose to let him. May there be many more of us like her.
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Some publisher abbreviations used in Bibliography:
C.L.A. = The Church Literature Association
GFS = The Girls’ Friendly Society
SCM = Student Christian Movement
SPCK = Society for Promotion of Christian Knowledge

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