

Bringing Arthur back

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The second coming of Arthur brought out the best in me. People began to recognise that I was a born leader. “Born to organise,” said Julie’s brother when he introduced me to the Creative Anachronists. “He may be a runt but he’s a

Inscriptions

– contemporary thinking
on art, philosophy and
psycho-analysis –

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Section: Literary fiction

Received: 13 April 2018

Accepted: 14 June 2018

Published: 1 July 2018

How to cite: Mills, Alice. “Bringing
Arthur back.” *Inscriptions* 1, no. 1
(2018): 14.

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clever runt, and he knows absolutely all there is to know about King Arthur.” I smiled and pretended to ignore the insult. Let them wait until I brought back Arthur, and then he’d sing another tune. Yelp another yelp, instead of yapping at me.

Truth was, I needed the Creative Anachronists to help bring back Arthur, or at least I thought I did. They were the ones with the mediaeval armour, and the expertise at cooking up mediaeval feasts, and the clothes, and the shoes with long curved toes, and the tent. I didn’t want Arthur to feel terrified when he arrived. A day or two of creative anachronism should settle him down nicely before he had to face electric lights and toilets and cars.

It wasn’t long before I discovered my mistake. These muscleheads knew nothing about Arthur beyond knights in shining armour and maidens waving at them from the balcony at spic-and-span tournaments. No horse-droppings for them. No horses, in fact, and that was actually a bonus for me. No-one is sure if Arthur actually knew about using horses in battle. I didn’t want my Arthur hiding under the table from a horse. The real problem with the Creative Anachronists was that they played fast and loose with time. Their armour came from a mishmash of centuries. They all wore clothes better than any mediaeval king could have dreamed of, cotton, lycra, stretch velvet. Zips. Bras and elasticated knickers, I dare say, not that I ever saw their underwear. And they all wanted to play at being kings and princesses and champions of the realm. Where were the milkmaids and the kitchen boys, the midwives and foresters and village idiots and army followers? I did not want my Arthur to find himself in the middle of a host of the highest nobility, speaking a language that he could not understand.

That was the point where I fell out with Julie. I’d met her at the Old English class at university, the first girl I’d ever really talked to, after the embarrassment of asking her out for a cup of coffee had finally been overcome. By me, that is. Julie never seemed at all keen on cups of coffee with me after that first time, after she’d listened to me tell her about Old English and Church Latin and how to do the assignment. After that, she kept telling me she was too busy for coffee at the university, and at the Creative Anachronists she was always excusing herself to go off and enchant the crowd. Enchant-a-crowd Julie, I began to call her, though never to her face.

Anyway, it was over an assignment in Old English that we met, and when she discovered that I was fluent in Latin and majoring in mediaeval history she couldn’t wait to introduce me to her brother, the president of the Creative Anachronists. That’s how I came to join them. “A born organiser,” he said, and right away at that first meeting they had me down for secretary and treasurer and chief organiser of the next tournament.

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I gave them a month of my best efforts and the tournament was the most successful ever. It actually made a profit, and they were more than happy for me to take over the social calendar. At first no-one noticed when I listed the bringing back of Arthur as their winter solstice event, but when they did they all thought it was a brilliant piece of publicity. So far so good, I thought. A leader has to lead, but sometimes he has to let his followers fool themselves in the process.

That was when I lost Julie. In hindsight I shouldn't just have told her to learn Old Welsh. I could have let up to it with a compliment or two on her Old English (not that it was all that good, in fact I'd have called it shaky at best). It wasn't tactful of me to say that I could cover the Old English and Latin side of things by myself, but that I just couldn't stretch my time to pick up Old Welsh as well. I needed the Welsh just in case the real Arthur turned out to be the Welsh one. She looked at me as though I was crazy. "It's only a game, for Christ's sake," she said. "Church Latin will impress the crowd just as well." I couldn't get her to see the point at all.

I'll say this for Julie, she didn't tell any of the Creative Anachronists about our disagreement. At least I don't think so. At the next meeting they behaved the way they always behaved -- bored out of their brains by the secretary's report, cheering the treasurer's report (we'd made enough money to buy a second hand van), all trying to speak first when the item about next month's pageant and tournament came up on the agenda. No-one even mentioned Julie's absence. Perhaps they were too busy complaining about the list of rules I'd prepared for all future activities of Creative Anachronism Inc.

I must admit I was getting anxious about bringing back Arthur and wanted them to have a practice run, getting their clothes right and all that. Rusty armour. A few smells. A bit of dirt. It was rash of me to spring the whole list on them at once. A good leader leads gently, allowing his troops to believe that they have chosen their own path. They might have agreed to the hessian tunics, if I hadn't also asked for dirty hands and hair and no socks. A few fake wounds -- that item went down quite well. But dogs in the kitchen tent and half the group as servants, they couldn't come at that. They all started to explain to me why it wouldn't work. It would scare off the children. The Department of Health would object. They weren't going to let their armour go rusty, anyway most of it was made of leather or aluminium. Who cared about being authentic, they were creative anachronists. They would all catch hideous diseases from eating with dirty hands out of the same pot. They weren't going to waste their velvet outfits. Hessian itched.

That was when the group nearly folded. Actually I think they were planning a palace revolt. They were going to disband the society formally and then meet secretly at Julie's brother's place under a new name without me. When I say "I think", I mean I overheard. Time for a bit of leadership, I thought. "Haven't you forgotten about bringing Arthur back next month?" I said. "All I had in mind was something a bit different for the solstice. Of course I didn't mean us to go out fighting in hessian all the time, and of course dirt isn't on for the pageant."

"What does he mean, *us* fighting?" asked an objectionable fellow who called himself Hammer. Hammerbrain more likely. I gave him a look that should have curdled the spit in his mouth. "Of course," I said, "if you aren't happy with my proposal, I'll resign from all my offices..." That shut them up. "If it's only for bringing back Arthur," they agreed. "If we can wear something under the hessian, it might not itch at all."

At the pageant and the tournament everyone was very nice to me. They all made a point of coming over to the table where I was taking the money and handing out the pamphlets and looking after the tea and coffee, and thanking me for working so hard. That made it all the more unexpected when the next meeting came along and I lost them entirely. I was too brisk about it, I see in hindsight. The true leader allows time to have no mastery over him. But the second coming of Arthur was only a week away and no-one had agreed to do anything. So I presented them with my list of jobs to be done, and they were shocked. "Two whole days. And nights. You can't mean all night, what kind of audience would hang around until three in the morning?" That was Hammerbrain, getting a laugh at my expense. At Arthur's expense.

It was Julie's brother who put an end to my plan. "No tea or coffee, you can't be serious," he said, and so of course I told him that Arthur would never have drunk tea or coffee in his life. Or had a hot shower. Or spoken English. Or eaten from a plate. Or worn nylon. Or used a toothbrush and toothpaste. "He's serious," Julie's brother said, when I'd finished telling them all the things King Arthur wouldn't know about. "He really believes we are going to bring back Arthur from the dead, or Avalon, or wherever. I'm sorry, but we aren't into that kind of weird stuff."

They all went silent for a bit, as if no-one knew what to say next. Then Hammerhead had another go at me. "You do know we're in Australia, right? This isn't Glastonbury or Cadbury or any of those places where Arthur just might be buried. Are you truly round the twist?" he said. And then they all started laughing, and then Julie's brother declared a spill of all positions on the committee. So I walked away. A good leader knows when to cut his losses.

The next day the paper phoned me up, and they came out and took a photo of me and wrote it up for the Friday edition. I could have sued them for libel. They did everything except actually call me a lunatic. At least I gave them the wrong information about the place it was going to be. Said it was the cemetery, just in case they tried to stop me.

After that I got plenty of phone calls, one from the Department of Health about serving food to the public with unwashed hands, and several from the council about permits and public assemblies and desecrating graves. I tried to explain to them that no public would be there and no digging up of dead bodies would be involved, but they didn't want to hear that. A private ritual, I told them, and a private ritual I meant it to be.

Private, that is, until the phone call from Hughey. That's what he called himself, and I never learned his mate's name. He said they were very keen to help me bring back Arthur. They were happy to stay up all night with me, the absence of tea and coffee didn't bother them at all as long as beer was ok. And he said they had leather gear that King Arthur would feel at home with.

Perhaps I shouldn't have said yes, but I was getting desperate for a bit of help. The solstice was tomorrow, and I didn't like the idea of bringing back Arthur to find himself all alone at the lookout (that was where I was really going to do it) with no-one to explain things to him. Hughey and his friend sounded all right over the phone but I must admit I got a shock when I met them the next afternoon. They wore leathers all right, but they hadn't mentioned the spikes and tattoos. Old Hammerhead would have wet himself meeting them in battle. Chains, they had. Hughey even had a swastika on the back of his jacket. Trying to look Celtic, I thought, and hadn't the heart to explain to him that it was going around in the wrong direction.

If I'd drunk all the beer they offered me, I'd have been flat on my face before sunset. I knew what they were up to, trying to get me drunk enough for one of them to move in and control King Arthur when he arrived, instead of me. The good leader is always one step in front. They hadn't worked out that King Arthur was not going to arrive in some fifteen hundred year old body. He was going to be me. I was going to be him. By twentieth century standards he would have been a short man, and I am on the short side, not like that pair of leathery apes. I was just the right shape and size for him to come back to. In a few minutes I'd be in control of Hughey and Stewey, they'd be grovelling in front of me, and Hammerhead and the rest of the Creative Anachronists would have a nasty surprise coming.

Anyway, the ritual went off more or less as planned, up to the toadstool bit. I had the cassette player ready, and took off my pants and jumper so that all Arthur would feel against his skin was hessian. It was getting to be unbearably itchy, so I went straight into the toadstool eating. Hughey and Stewey, or whatever his name was, began to chant, "Arthur, Arthur," as I'd told them to. The toadstool tasted terrible, almost too bitter to swallow. Then my eyes went queer and everything went sideways and twisty, but I could hear Hughey and friend starting to chant, "Hitler, Hitler," instead of Arthur. I tried to tell them to stop all that nonsense, but the words wouldn't come out of my mouth. Oh no, I thought, I underestimated them badly. They must have worked out that I was bringing back Arthur in my own body, and decided to take over the ritual and bring Hitler back again. He was not exactly a tall man either. I didn't stand a chance, in fact I fell over and blacked out before I could do anything else whatsoever.

I suppose I should feel grateful to the Creative Anachronists for choosing the lookout for their solstice party. After all, they drove back down the hill and called the police and probably saved me from serious damage. Hughey and Cluey had been laying into me with their chains when I didn't turn into Hitler in front of their eyes. At least I still have all my teeth.

The first thing I tried to say in hospital was, "Am I Hitler?" but no-one could understand what I was saying through the bandages, and when they did, they thought I was high on morphine. Or toadstool. It wasn't until yesterday that I could actually take a look at myself and see that I was still me. Not Arthur. Not Hitler, thank Christ. Those apes would have had me killing off all the abos and then invading Poland again. Arthur now, the world would

have thanked me for bringing back a bit of justice and righteousness. Punishing the bad and rewarding the good, that would have been me.

Anyway, the good leader learns from every setback. After all the trouble I've had with bringing back Arthur, the second coming of Christ should be dead easy.