



MICHAEL TIPPETT'S 'LOST' PRISON LETTER

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Introduction

The letters sent by the English composer Michael Tippett from Wormwood Scrubs Prison, where, a conscientious objector, he spent two months in summer 1943, form a remarkable and important sequence, illuminating not only Tippett's life and compositions but the experience of a gaoled objector to the Second World War. Four prison letters had been thought to survive, documenting in detail his imprisonment, which included turning pages for Benjamin Britten during a recital in the chapel, and conducting the prison orchestra. In 2023 a fifth letter was found, its discovery reported in the national press.¹ Its publication is intended to complement the previously released documents, completing what is now a series of five until such time as a collected edition of Tippett's letters, of which only a fifth has seen print, can be undertaken.²

Tippett (1905–1998) registered as a conscientious objector on 25 November 1940, nine days after being called up to the Second World War. He was summoned to a tribunal on 3 February 1942 and, after support from among others Ralph Vaughan Williams, was ordered to perform non-combatant duties. Such a prospect, which involved being given a military rank and uniform, was incompatible with Tippett's absolutist-pacifist beliefs. He appealed the ruling, which on 5 May 1942 was downgraded to civilian work; he was ordered to become a labourer in Buckinghamshire. His refusal led to his being called to trial, on 21 June 1943, at Oxted Police Court in Surrey. Failing to satisfy the magistrates that he had a reasonable excuse for his failure to comply with the terms of his exemption from military duties, he was sentenced to three months'

¹ Dalya Alberge, "'Fascinating" Tippett Letter Reveals Composer Changed by Prison', *Guardian*, 8 July 2023, p. 29.

² The letter is printed by kind permission of the Trustees of the Sir Michael Tippett Will Trust, to whom I extend my thanks, as also to Alice Nissen and the late Stella Maude, and to Christopher Scobie at the British Library. At the time of writing, the Library, home to Tippett's manuscripts, was suffering the effects of a cyberattack in October 2023, making both the manuscripts catalogue and many of the documents themselves unavailable; it is to be hoped the manuscripts under discussion here will soon be available, and I am grateful to Alice Nissen for sending me photographs. The sole volume of Tippett's correspondence is *Selected Letters of Michael Tippett*, ed. Thomas Schuttenhelm (London: Faber, 2005). For an outline of the archival history of Tippett's music manuscripts and correspondence, see Oliver Soden, *Michael Tippett: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2019), pp. 4–5, 721–24. The archive marked 'Nicholas Wright private collection' has since been deposited at the British Library (uncatalogued, as of August 2024).

imprisonment at Wormwood Scrubs. His sentence reduced to two months for good behaviour, he was released on 21 August.³

From prison he was permitted a single correspondent. He chose to write to Evelyn Maude (1891–1971), a friend whose initially passionate feelings for him (they had been neighbours in the Surrey town of Oxted for some 20 years) cooled, on realisation of his homosexuality, into an intimate companionship. Quietly but not publicly sympathetic to Tippet's socialist and pacifist beliefs, Maude made an ideal correspondent, and her connections to the many strands of his life, personal and professional, allowed her to organise a great deal in his absence, more effectively perhaps than many to whom Tippet was close during the Second World War. Friends such as the writer Francesca Allinson or his then lover Douglas Newton were leading peripatetic and troubled existences; Newton, also an objector, had narrowly escaped imprisonment himself, and would have been dismissed as a possible correspondent by the authorities, who subjected each and every letter to censorship.

History of the Prison Letters

Until 2023, four letters sent from Tippet to Maude from Wormwood Scrubs were known to survive, evidently written once every Monday fortnight from the first night of his imprisonment: on 21 June, on 5 July, on 19 July and on 16 August.⁴ Each letter is on a booklet of official prison paper, filled in by Tippet on the first page with his prison number (5832), his name and the date, with 'Wormwood Scrubs' officially stamped beneath; there follows a list of regulations 'as to communications, by Visit or Letter, between prisoners and their friends'. The handwriting, owing to the limited space, is necessarily small.

The documents remained in possession of Evelyn Maude and her daughter, Tippet's god-daughter, Stella Maude. Images of the manuscripts were published in 1977 in a catalogue for the travelling exhibition *A Man of Our Time*.⁵ Complete transcriptions were then included in Tippet's autobiography, *Those Twentieth Century Blues*, and reproduced (with minor transcription differences) in his *Selected Letters*.⁶ In 2004, the manuscripts were donated to the Tippet Collection at the British Library, where they are now catalogued as MS Mus. 1752, ff. 26–32.

On the death of Stella Maude, in 2022, a hitherto unknown letter, written by Tippet on Wormwood Scrubs paper, was discovered by her executor, Alice Nissen, on, coincidentally, 21 June 2023, 80 years to the day after Tippet's sentence. Nissen, Stella's niece, kindly sent me a photograph: 'This has probably been known about and photocopied years ago but I'm wanting to know if there's an archive

³ A fuller account of Tippet's life in the Second World War can be found in Soden, *Michael Tippet*, pp. 237–340, and Ian Kemp, *Tippet: The Composer and his Music* (London: Ernst Eulenburg, 1985), pp. 40–49. For the most recent study of conscientious objectors to the Second World War, see Tobias Kelly, *Battles of Conscience: British Pacifists and the Second World War* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2022).

⁴ Dated 15 August in *Selected Letters of Michael Tippet*, p. 308, and in Michael Tippet, *Those Twentieth Century Blues* (London: Hutchinson, 1991), p. 153, but clearly marked 16 August in manuscript (British Library), tying in to the Monday routine.

⁵ Covent Garden Gallery, *A Man of Our Time* (London: Schott, 1977), pp. 41–53.

⁶ Tippet, *Those Twentieth Century Blues*, pp. 145–56; *Selected Letters of Michael Tippet*, pp. 299–310.

like the British Library where it should go, rather than be lost in a family drawer. Any thoughts?⁷

My thoughts were that, far from being known about and photocopied, the document was a new discovery, a missing link in what should, given the fortnightly pattern, have been a quintet of letters written in the Scrubs. The 'missing' letter runs to 1,410 words and is written into a bifolium of official prison paper comprising three sides of handwriting (f1v; f2r; f2v). f1r is given over, as with the others, to official prison rubric. On the bottom right-hand corner of f1v is a small doodle, made in pencil (as opposed to the ink of the handwriting): a circle with six lines coming from it, perhaps an insect. f1 has for reasons unknown had a centimetre removed (neatly cut, rather than torn), omitting Tippett's name, the date of the letter and roughly three lines of the handwriting verso, although it is hard to think that the letter might have opened with anything incriminating or worthy of deliberate censorship. The document therefore starts in medias res ('Next visit...'), omitting any greeting to Evelyn Maude, although she is clearly the recipient. The date can almost certainly be pinpointed to 2 August 1943, the 'missing' Monday between the already known letters a fortnight either side (on 19 July and on 16 August). This date is further verified by the letter's content, with mentions of a recent concert by Walter Goehr on '17th' (a Wigmore Hall performance of Tippett's Double Concerto, on 17 July 1943) and an imminent Britten–Pears concert on 'Saturday' (an outing of Tippett's cantata *Boyhood's End*, on 5 August).

The Missing Letter

Tippett's letters from prison, written when he was 38, catch him at a time when his reputation was far from established. Much of his early adulthood had been dedicated to community music-making and music education, either in the North of England or with the Co-operative Society, where his work espoused the far-left politics he eventually abandoned. From 1940 he was Director of Music at Morley College, an adult education college in South London, leading the choir in an innovative and important concert series. In the summer of 1943 only eight pieces in his official catalogue (of 75) had been completed, some of which – including his oratorio *A Child of Our Time* (finished in 1941) – had yet to reach a premiere.

Like Tippett's other letters from prison, the document from 2 August is a pleasing combination of spiritual rumination ('The inner world is the secret of this strength...') and prison practicality ('my other coloured-handle toothbrush'). The colour of a toothbrush handle or an idle doodling can be as valuable in the conveying of history as the most hifalutin psychological meditations. The fine-grained detail of the letter ('prs of tennis-shoes with toe-holes!') tells the reader a great deal about the person who wrote it and the times in which he lived, when any confusion over a double room being booked between two men, as seems to have been the case in a mix-up for which the letter apologises, was cause for concern. The cast list – musicians John Amis and Antony Hopkins; conductor Walter Goehr and writer Francesca Allinson; Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears – is star-studded, and mentions of Tippett's innovative programming at Morley College

⁷ Alice Nissen, personal communication, 23 June 2023.

(Weelkes and Warlock) and of his gestating symphony, eventually 'No. 1', are illuminating.

Most noteworthy of all is the final paragraph, where, as was typical for Tippett the letter writer, he embarks on honest and acute self-analysis, pondering his relationship with younger objectors in prison (among them the artist Arnold Machin), and concedes, as if for future readers, the value of his correspondence in showing a private rather than public face: 'The letters show you the Michael that is not shown to my fellows here, or the young friends.' The prison sentence is newly revealed as a turning point between youth and encroaching middle-age: 'I do seem to have lost the nostalgia for adolescence I used to have', a statement that intrigues in the light of Tippett's having recently completed, in May 1943, his cantata *Boyhood's End*, with a text by W. H. Hudson that, evoking a magical childhood in Argentina, celebrates or even memorialises that very nostalgia ('I want only to keep what I have'). As Tippett predicts: 'a new "me" will replace the old, as well as the habitual cottage-work life return'.

The letter is a significant addition to our knowledge of Michael Tippett's life and of the experience of conscientious objectors imprisoned during the Second World War. In August 2023 the document was donated to the British Library, and is now catalogued as MS Mus. 1943.⁸

Editorial Methods

In an effort to convey the atmosphere of the letter I have included all of Tippett's misspellings, punctuation, shorthand and abbreviations, annotating where necessary; underlinings are his. His corrections are also retained, indicated in the text by superscript following a caret: ^. The letter uses various symbol abbreviations for 'and', which I have unified to an ampersand, and alternates between square and round brackets, which I have unified to round, using square solely for any editorial annotation. I have retained Tippett's paragraph breaks, which he indicated not by starting a new line and wasting space, but by a vertical bar: |. Varying usage of double and single quotation marks are Tippett's own. When corrections led him to strike through text so thickly as to render it illegible, I have given xxx.

The Letter

Next visit: I think I shld like to see Bergmann⁹ [illegible] visit a week ahead it will be Wed: in next week, if that isn't granted then Wed in my last week. Amis¹⁰ can bring him. I want to talk music & Morley for the autumn etc. I'll send you a letter as usual. You might warn Bergmann of this & p'raps ring up John [Amis] & see if O.K. | Now for clothes: my other coloured-handle toothbrush, toothpaste, shaving-brush, razor-blade, hairbrush, scissors from the 2nd draw [sic] down of the music-shelves under the

⁸ Christopher Scobie, 'New Tippett Acquisitions', British Library blog, 6 August 2023, <https://blogs.bl.uk/music/2023/08/new-tippett-acquisitions.html> (accessed 22 August 2024).

⁹ Walter Bergmann (1902–1988), lawyer and musician, specialist in recorder and early music, who escaped Nazi Germany for England, where Tippett, Director of Music at Morley College in South London from 1940 to 1951, invited him to join the music department.

¹⁰ John Amis (1922–2013), arts administrator and broadcaster, friend and unofficial assistant to Tippett while working for the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

phone: (& at the same time, from that draw, my P.O. [Post Office] Savings Book 2394 – not the 5185 wh has Income Tax money etc!) mackintosh, & prs of tennis-shoes with toe-holes! (not the brand-new pr.) 2 white shirts with unfrayed el collar, 2 dō [ditto] with frayed collar for hike etc (4 in all); bathing-slip if there or on loan ^{^from someone}; 2 woollen socks (green, grey), 2 cotton socks; plenty of hanks [handkerchiefs]; my ordinary black shoes, rubber-soled, for walking (only v. best here with me); my grey with zip-faster [sic] & ^{^my} green pullovers; the 2nd best grey tweed jacket that wants a ^{^lowest} button (please sew one on!), a pr of flannel trousers (have only my best suit here); my 2 maps of Cornwall¹¹ (behind the sofa); ^{^& blue & green shorts corduroy (2), all to go in} all there in the big ruck-sack from my clothes cupboard. And the sack to John at LPO [London Philharmonic Orchestra] or to Ben's,¹² where I will change from my suit after the concert, & where I hope p'raps to have supper, & with Den,¹³ if B.B. [Britten] agrees. And now for the day: will you bring my music-case for the books, mack if you think necessary & if rucksack not at Bens one of the clean, good shirts ^{^& clean hank}. We'll breakfast & bath at Bens: then I want haircut etc – eventually Fresca¹⁴ & John & any others at the New¹⁵ for lunch: then concert: & then as the night train leaves at 9.50 & there is fear of a huge crowd we ought to be at Padd [Paddington Station]: by 8-30. So I ought to go straight back to Ben's for a last meal & change etc. | Wld you ask Bergmann to let John have for me for Cornwall copies of the chosen Weelkes¹⁶ stuff for Morley, as I must look at it in that week (I believe I remember a piano). Also ask Tony¹⁷ or John to obtain a copy of Warlock:¹⁸ 1° Corpus Christi: sop:bar:str 4tet (Curwen 1932) 2° Corpus Christi : contralto, tenor, chorus (Curwen 1919); 3° Cornish Christmas Carol (Boosey 1918). | Wld you write Goehr¹⁹ for me & thank him heartily for the 17th – say I'm quite sure that eventually he will do the recording (any chance does he think thro Walter ~~xxx~~ Legge?),²⁰ shall want to see him as soon as maybe to talk over

¹¹ As soon as he was released from prison Tippet holidayed in Mevagissey, South Cornwall.

¹² Benjamin Britten (1913–1976), composer and lifelong friend of Tippet, who with his partner, tenor Peter Pears, collected Tippet from prison at 7.30 a.m. on 21 August 1943 and went with him to a concert at the Wigmore Hall that evening. Britten was then living at 45A St John's Wood High Street, London.

¹³ (Brean Leslie) Douglas 'Den' Newton (1920–2001), poet and museum curator, who began an affair with Tippet in 1941.

¹⁴ (Enid) Francesca Allinson (1902–1945), musician and writer who maintained a passionate though platonic friendship with Tippet in the 1930s and 1940s, ended by her suicide, in 1945.

¹⁵ If not a restaurant or hotel (unidentified) perhaps a picnic lunch at the Shaftesbury Avenue offices of the newly established Society for Promotion of New Music, where John Amis was working as Secretary.

¹⁶ Thomas Weelkes (1576?–1623) was among the many English Renaissance composers programmed by Tippet's choir at Morley College.

¹⁷ Antony Hopkins (1921–2014), composer and broadcaster who sang in the Morley choir, professing Tippet as his mentor and unofficial composition teacher.

¹⁸ Peter Warlock (1894–1930), pseudonym of Philip Heseltine, British composer. The version of the Corpus Christi Carol with tenor solo was Peter Pears' first solo recording, made in 1936; Tippet may have intended to invite Pears to perform the piece at Morley.

¹⁹ Walter Goehr (1903–1960), German conductor, recruited by Tippet to the staff at Morley College, who on 17 July 1943 led a performance at the Wigmore Hall of Tippet's Concerto for Double String Orchestra, at which it was announced that 'circumstances beyond his control prevented the composer from attending'.

²⁰ Henry Walter Legge (1906–1979), English record producer associated with EMI and Head of Artists at HMV; Legge could have given any recording wide circulation by making it part of HMV's cheap 'Plum Label' sequence of recent English music. Walter Goehr in fact recorded the Concerto at Levy's Sound Studio in August 1943, supervised in Tippet's continued absence by Benjamin Britten.

what he thought of it. | Will you see if John has got the Morley autumn concert bills out & Rose²¹ has some for mailing: the first is only 5 weeks off! (Sept 11th). | Tolworth²² claim form: every time I went you must claim for fares: write once on the back of the form "Return Oxted – Clapham Junction 4/5, d^o Clapham-Tolworth 1/7 –, then on the front in the proper places "so many journeys at 6/- = so much". Will add up to a few pounds. | I gather Tony is taking Tolworth next term on request: however this has come about am v. pleased to be released. | Wld you like to ring or write Gerald Cooper²³ & say that I hope I haven't alarmed him by my conduct, that I wish him all success for his series, that I hope to be at the 21st, & to make it a rendezvous for reappearance, & can I have 2 nice seats on the gang-way not too near (Fresca, 1) – & if he feels like it one or two more nearby for friends.²⁴ | Please ring Ben & Peter²⁵ & wish them everything herzlich [heartfelt] for Saturday – my blessings on them & it. | The Rose problem worries me. She has written already 9 letters to Fletcher who sensibly hasn't let on till he heard from mother.²⁶ John & Tony told me she was so possessive of the choir it threatened to make everything impossible. I never of course asked her to meet me; what a thought! & as for "spending the day", I never have nor will do any such thing. If you can prepare the ground for a serious set-to when I get out, I wish you would. Its got to be made clear to her that I do not give her a thought, nor do I feel my life in any way bound up with hers. So it is really not my doing this time abt the 21st, but Rose really excelling herself. Please be as frank as you can be, & let mother be so too. I shall find out from Tony & John & Bergmann what the choir business amounted to & will act according [sic], later. | The symphony doesn't move overtly very much & I don't force it.²⁷ Life "in association" is more communal & gayer thereby & more natural, if less privacy. Also I am much stronger again. I don't think I shall be so v. done-up on release; & I gather the boys have decided on a car from Truro to Portloe.²⁸ I fancy the

²¹ Rose Mori, Tippet's secretary at Morley College.

²² Presumably a choir temporarily conducted by Tippet at Tolworth, Greater London.

²³ Gerald Cooper, concert promoter and curator associated with the Wigmore Hall.

²⁴ Tippet attended the Wigmore Hall concert on the evening of his release, 21 August 1943; the programme included his String Quartet No. 2. Evelyn Maude, at Tippet's request, placed an advert in the pacifist magazine *Peace News*: 'Michael Tippet's release from Wormwood Scrubs Prison will take place on August 21st, coinciding with a performance. He hopes to make this concert the occasion for reunion with many of his friends.' *Peace News*, 13 August 1943, p. 6.

²⁵ Peter Pears (1910–1986), tenor, Britten's partner and muse, who on Saturday 7 August 1943 gave a performance of Tippet's cantata for tenor and piano, *Boyhood's End*, accompanied by Britten, at the Wigmore Hall. 'The composer,' wrote Scott Goddard in the *Daily News* (9 August 1943, p. 3), 'detained on other duties, could not share the applause.'

²⁶ Presumably Rose Mori (see above), although Tippet had been fending off amorous advances from Rose Turnbull, daughter of the signalman in his home village of Oxted, Surrey; it is possible that Mori was her married name. Fletcher, and the involvement of Tippet's mother, Isabel Kemp, are unsolved. See also *Selected Letters of Michael Tippet*, p. 309.

²⁷ Early plans for what became Tippet's Symphony No. 1, which he began in earnest in 1944 and completed on 20 August 1945; prior to the withdrawal of his Symphony in B flat (1932–33), Tippet considered the symphony his second, and premiered it, in November 1945, as 'Symphony 1945'.

²⁸ Tippet would be joined on the Cornish trip by John Amis and Antony Hopkins; Portloe, on the country's south coast, is some ten miles south of the cathedral city of Truro, reached by train from Paddington. In the end the troublesome room reservations were made redundant by the RAF, which commandeered their lodgings, a fact the travellers were alerted to when on board the train. The holiday took place a little way along the

period of the other plane is fairly over in here – & quite definitely I am unlikely to go ascetic outside by voluntary effort. But I dare say the enforced stoppage will have been a v. real gain. And I take yr remarks on emotional susceptibility with common-sense. Actually one is emotional only en masse or for some sudden contact with the authorities, or news – but not at all with the individual fellow, or hardly at all – & never with the young. I seem quite safe there. I have a gay & young self & an older; & another inner & so on. I think it will be alright in Cornwall, except that they will all wish to mother & father me! But I'm sorry to have been so inept over my domestic affairs at Portloe. I didn't see it at the time in that light. Its really only Tony & Alison²⁹ for whom it's a more serious matter. I merely meant to have left in the holiday plans the very sensible ordering when booking the rooms to say "2 double, & one single". Actually it may come out like this anyhow as I think it will suit them easier. David³⁰ & I had a double room I remember. I merely thought it wld save bother to specify: but I forgot in the hurry & flurry of getting ready for prison. So there we are. Actually I'm astonishingly neutral here & able to contact anyone. The young conchies take me for 26 or so & only v. few older men come forward with appeals to one's maturer experiences.³¹ It's a v. happy temperament, because I do seem to have lost the nostalgia for adolescence I used to have, & am perfectly ready to be with them, of them, or not at all as circumstances or predilection dictate. The inner world is the secret of this strength I realise: & the result of all the xxx^{chaotic} struggles of the earlier days.³² Also you yself must take in account that the letters show you the Michael that is not shown to my fellows here, or the young friends. I am instinctively careful not to impose maturer emotions on them, but to let them set the pace. I think you need have no fear. Yet I need this youthful gaiety as well as the other; from you, from David, Fresca & books & one's own communion. Like you I value regularity, as this compulsory upheaval assures me. In here I have the illusion I shall never (!) be in the cottage again.³³ I suppose to some extent a new 'me' will replace the old, as well as the habitual cottage-work life return. Time moves gradually if laboriously. Am reading a life of Wilfred Scawen Blunt;³⁴ v. good. I shall get terribly impatient as we near the end. Love to everyone – & in our own way to you.

Michael

coast from Portloe, at Mevagissey and St Austell. Hopkins and Amis had vivid memories of the trip; see Antony Hopkins, *Beating Time* (London: Michael Joseph, 1982), pp. 115–16, and John Amis, *A Miscellany* (London: Faber, 1985), p. 175.

²⁹ Alison Purves became Antony Hopkins' wife in 1947 and joined the Cornish holiday.

³⁰ David Ayerst (1904–1992), journalist and lifelong (heterosexual) friend of Tippett.

³¹ On Tippett's friendship with and support for younger conscientious objectors, see Arnold Machin, *Artist of an Icon: The Memoirs of Arnold Machin* (Kirstead: Frontier Publishing, 2002), pp. 75–78.

³² Having suffered something tantamount to a nervous breakdown in 1938, after ending a troubled love affair with the artist Wilfred Franks, Tippett channelled his political and sexual turmoil into an extended period of Jungian dream analysis.

³³ Whitegates Cottage, Oxted, Surrey, Tippett's home since 1938.

³⁴ Edith Finch, *Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, 1840–1922* (Oxford: Alden Press, 1938), a life of the English poet and writer.