

## WG and the CWA

John Creasey (1908-1973) was a prolific English author who wrote more than 500 books – mostly crime novels – under his own name plus as many as twenty pseudonyms. He it was who organised a meeting on 5 November 1953 at the National Liberal Club, Whitehall Place, London to which fellow crime writers were invited. Though leading protagonists such as Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, Hammond Innes and Francis Durbridge chose not to attend, a dozen others did. So on that day was founded the **Crime Writers Association**, with membership, at three guineas per year (and in contrast to the more exclusive elected-members-only Detection Club of Dorothy L. Sayers *et al.*) open to anyone having published a crime story or short stories or factual articles about crime or with relevant film or TV credits to their name.

Under Creasey's enthusiastic chairmanship, the fledgling Association met regularly (usually monthly), swelled its membership, held an exhibition of crime books, arranged for a critics' panel to choose the best crime novel of the year (this, from 1955, becoming an annual award), launched its own in-house newsletter – *Crime Writer*, later *Red Herrings* – and, in 1956, published *Butcher's Dozen*, the first of a regular series of short story anthologies.

The *raisons d'être* of the CWA were several. Besides the obvious social benefit (for writing is a lonely business), one of its key aims was “to give reasonable hope that both the prestige and the fortunes of crime writers generally should be improved” – reflecting the view, quite prevalent at the time, that, in Creasey's words, the genre was a “poor relation of the writing craft; a back door to literature.”

Another objective was to seek “a more equitable share of library income”, a cause long dear to authors' hearts and the subject of a long-running campaign (in which WG, whilst chairman of the Society of Authors, was closely involved) that led ultimately to the introduction (though not until 1982) of Public Lending Right.

The first CWA "book of the year" prize covered novels published in the year June 1954 to May 1955 with the Crossed Red Herrings Award bestowed on **Winston Graham**, whose *The Little Walls* edged out *Blind Date* by Leigh Howard, *Scales Of Justice* by Ngaio Marsh and *The Man Who Didn't Fly* by Margo Bennett. Graham was presented with his award – "a shield-shaped trophy on which the whimsical

device was enamelled of red herrings, crossed"<sup>1</sup> – at the first CWA Awards Dinner – principal guest Agatha Christie – held at the Criterion Restaurant, Piccadilly on 5 April 1956.<sup>2</sup>



**THE FIRST DINNER OF THE CRIME WRITERS' ASSOCIATION**

Three of the guests at the London dinner are (from left) Michael Gilbert, Josephine Bell and John Creasey. The occasion was marked by the first award of a trophy to be given annually to the writer of the best crime story. The first winner is Winston Graham, who is the author of *The Little Walls*.

In 1960 CWA revised the name of its best crime novel award to the Gold Dagger Award, making WG one of only five authors to receive a Crossed Red Herring Award (the others Edward Grierson, Julian Symons, Margot Bennett and Eric Ambler in 1956-59 respectively). In 1969, a "runners-up" Silver Dagger was introduced alongside the Gold; subsequently, others to cover different categories were added: the John Creasey New Blood Dagger (for best first crime novel) in

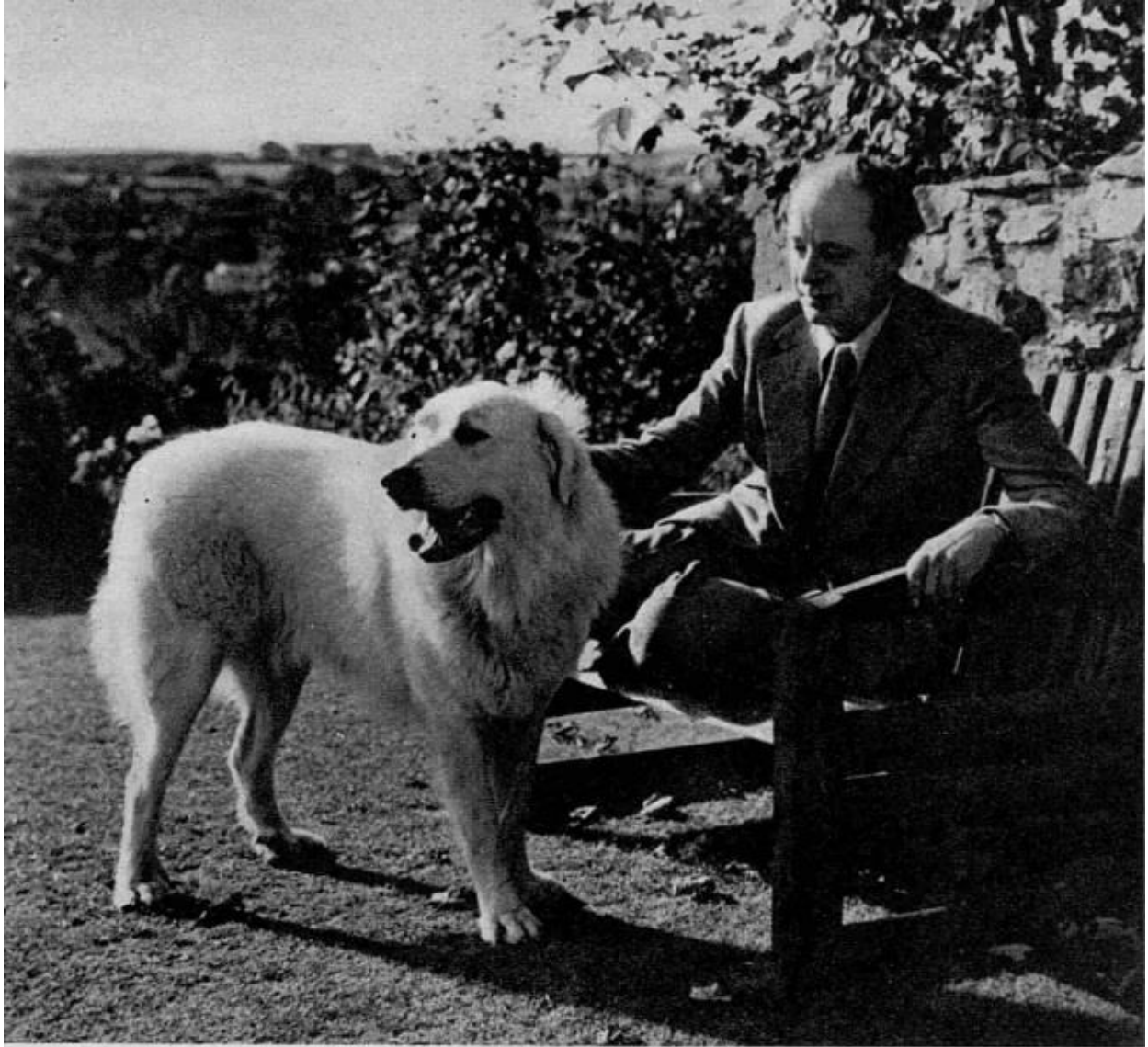
1973, the Diamond Dagger (for Lifetime Achievement) in 1986, the Last Laugh Dagger (for best humorous crime novel) in 1988, the Dagger In The Library (for the author most popular with library users) in 1994, the Ellis Peters Historical Dagger (for best historical crime novel) in 1999, the Ian Fleming Steel Dagger (for best thriller) in 2002, the International Dagger (for best foreign language crime novel translated into English) in 2006 and so on.

In 2005, to celebrate the Gold Dagger's golden jubilee, CWA members chose as "best of the best" and winner of their "Dagger of Daggers" John Le Carré's 1963 epic *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold*. As for WG, after his inaugural triumph he was never shortlisted again in either the main category or any of the subsidiary categories named above, although five of his titles – *The Tumbled House*, *Marnie*, *After The Act*, *The Walking Stick* and *Angell, Pearl and Little God* – might all have been considered contenders in their time. In contrast to the majority of winners, of course, he was not a genre specialist. Although best remembered now, thanks to TV, for his period Poldark romances, in his last three decades he published eight of those titles *but also nine others*. "I don't like to go on repeating myself," he told William G. Smith in 1959. "I know that it's an advantage in some ways to keep on writing the same sort of book, but I feel that one grows more by having a shot at something else."<sup>3</sup>

Yet even his one CWA award puts him in select company: the prolific Dick Francis (1920-2010), Henning Mankell (1948-2015), Patricia Cornwell and Ian Rankin (to date) have won just one Gold Dagger each, while crimewriting doyen and genre specialist P. D. James (1920-2014) never managed even that (though she did pick up three silvers). The pity, in WG's case is that, just as he is about so much more than *Poldark*, so too *The Little Walls*, its award notwithstanding, less than represents the best of him. In his strong run of modern-day fifties novels from *Night Without Stars* in 1950 through to *The Tumbled House* in 1959, there are better – indeed, two, arguably three better. That said, that his fourth best contemporary novel of a decade should still be considered good enough to scoop "Best of Year" bears eloquent witness to the consistently high standard he always aspired to and seldom failed to achieve.

(In part from original material by Martin Edwards – with thanks)

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WG with Garrick, Perranporth, 1955

## SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> *The Tatler and Bystander*, 18 April 1956

<sup>2</sup> Clipping on page 2 from *The Sphere*, 21 April 1956

<sup>3</sup> *Books and Bookmen*, October 1959

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