

## WG and Ian Chapman

When Hodder and Stoughton poached WG from Ward, Lock in 1949, it was on the back of a promise to "publish (him) with the greatest possible enthusiasm and put their whole publicity and sales force behind the books" and it seems, through the decade that followed, that all went well. But, by the mid-sixties, after an inexplicable failure to exploit the huge publicity given to *Marnie* by Princess Grace of Monaco's on-off participation in Hitchcock's film of the book, and for "other reasons too", the "somewhat disillusioned" author was ready to move again.

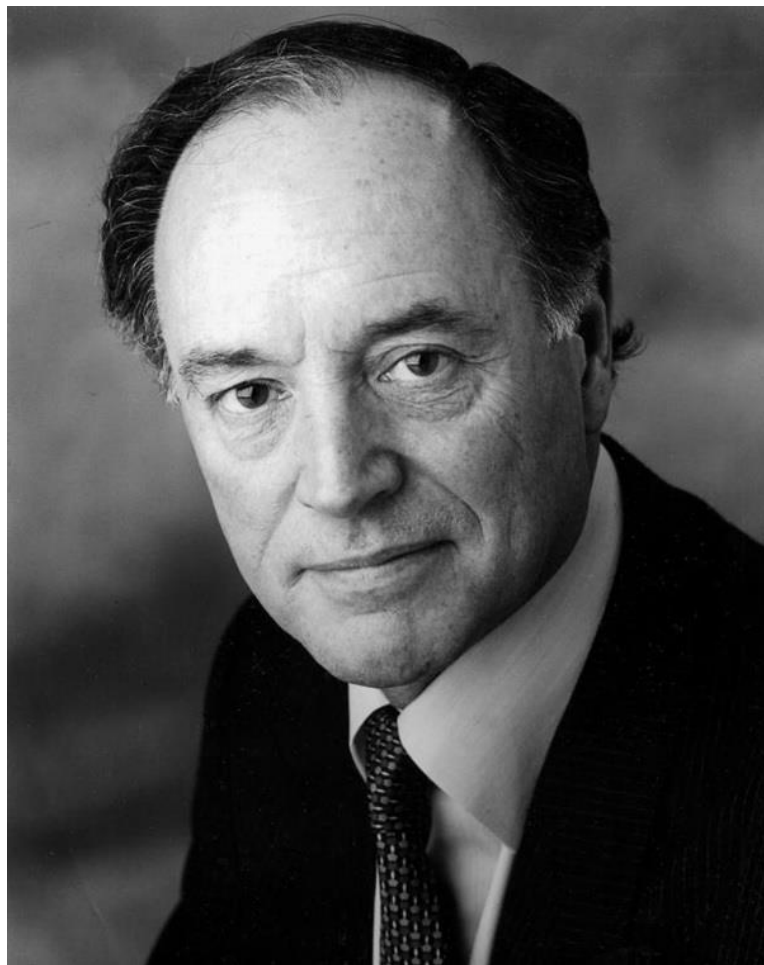
Once word got out, he was courted by four UK publishers, two of whom – Charles Pick of Heinemann and Max Rheinhardt – he counted as personal friends. His family favoured Rheinhardt, whose Bodley Head imprint had already republished several WG titles, with more to come, but the informed opinion he sought from three trade insiders was unequivocal: he must sign with Collins. WG was acquainted with Billy Collins, whom he considered "very likeable but slightly unknowable" and also George Hardinge, one of the firm's editors, so took the plunge. Hardinge moved soon after to Macmillan; nonetheless, wrote WG

*... there was an unexpected bonus (for) I met the Managing Director of Collins, one Ian Chapman, who was among the most distinguished publishers of his generation, and, a few months later, Marjory, his charming wife ... I look on them now as my most valued and loving of friends.<sup>1</sup>*

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**Francis Ian Chapman (1925-2019)** was born to the Reverend Peter and Frances Chapman in St Fergus, an Aberdeenshire village three miles north of Peterhead. Educated at Shawlands Academy in Glasgow and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Ian was a gifted musician with ambitions to become a concert violinist, but with a country at war precluding that option, he elected to train as an RAF navigator instead. Imperfect eyesight closed off this path, too, with the result that, rather than plying the skies, the would-be Menuhin's National Service was spent underground, hewing coal.<sup>2</sup> God, it seems, had other plans for this young man.

After emerging from the pit for the final time in 1947 Chapman was taken on as a trainee at the Glasgow headquarters of publisher William Collins. In the nineteenth century the family-run company had built its success on printing Bibles and the tradition remained strong. In 1950 Chapman was dispatched to America to sell the Good Book across the US and did well enough that within two years he was recalled to Glasgow as manager of the Bible division. In 1953 he married Marjory Swinton, a fellow editor at Collins. Soon after this came an event which was to change the course of several lives.



Ian Chapman (1925-2019)

Chapman read a short story in *The Glasgow Herald* by an unknown writer named Alistair MacLean. Titled *Dileas*, about the sea and sailors, it had won first prize in a competition run by the paper and Chapman found it finely written, vividly plotted and totally compelling. MacLean, like Chapman a son of the manse, was then a teacher of English, history and geography at Gallowflat School in Rutherglen. Ian and Marjory invited him to lunch.

At the grand Royal Restaurant in Nile Street, the couple encountered a dour and puritanical Highlander to whom English was a second language (after Gaelic) who showed little enthusiasm for the idea of writing a novel for William Collins. Over the meal, however, the conversation turned to the teacher's hair-raising wartime experiences in the Royal Navy, braving U-boats and air attacks while escorting Arctic convoys. (MacLean also served in the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Far East theatres.) Chapman was gripped and told his guest that he had the perfect subject matter for a novel of derring-do adventure. Yet MacLean again dismissed the idea and the Chapmans left the restaurant believing that their initiative would come to nothing.

Ten weeks later, Chapman was surprised to pick up the phone and hear MacLean's Doric brogue asking: "So, do you want to come and collect this thing?" Chapman dashed across Glasgow to the tenement where MacLean lived with his German wife Gisela and their baby son Lachlan and stood on the doorstep in the rain while the writer fetched his manuscript wrapped in brown paper tied with string. MacLean handed it over with the words "Ach, any idiot can write a book."

Chapman took the MS home, read it overnight and immediately recognised a best seller. After Collins paid MacLean a substantial advance, *HMS Ulysses* was published in September 1955, sold a quarter of a million copies in six months and has continued to sell in both hard and softback since. MacLean went on to write several blockbusters that were made into films, including *The Guns of Navarone*, *Ice Station Zebra* and *Where Eagles Dare*, becoming in the process one of the world's biggest-selling novelists with global sales estimated at between 150 and 200 million.<sup>3</sup>

Chapman remained MacLean's publisher, agent, friend and promoter until the author's death in 1987, during which time his own career advanced in tandem. Appointed UK sales manager on the back of the success of *HMS Ulysses*, he moved to London and his inexorable rise to the top of the publishing tree was underway. In the next twenty-five years he became managing director, chief executive and eventually chairman of what was by then a worldwide publishing empire; he also became the first head of the firm in its 160-year history who was not a direct descendant of the original William Collins.

On succeeding to the chairmanship of Collins in 1979, Chapman found the company facing the double jeopardy of substantial financial losses and a takeover bid by News International. He implemented a crash programme of pruning and reorganisation that restored the company to profit and repelled a full takeover – Chapman and his team retained control while News International took a 41.7 per cent share and Rupert Murdoch joined the board. Through the eighties the business prospered.

Yet, like others, WG could see the writing on the wall; on 16 December 1988, the *Independent* published this letter from him:

### **Freedom at Collins**

Dear Sir,

The proposed takeover of the publishing house of Collins, which is now reaching a crucial stage, highlights a situation which has been bedevilling the literary world for a good part of the last 40 years.

In publishing, a relationship builds up between an author and his publisher; a sort of business friendship, both parts of which are equally valid and important. This partnership takes time to establish and is very hard, sometimes impossible, to transfer.

Since the war, this kind of relationship has particularly flourished in small publishing houses, which one by one have gone to the wall to the great detriment of the literary profession and the community. But it has always been argued that these firms were underfunded, overstaffed or inefficiencies had crept in which provided some degree of justification for their being taken over.

Nothing could be further from the truth in the case of Collins. A very big firm by publishing standards, they have gone from strength to strength in the last decade, both in a literary and financial sense. It would be grossly unjust and totally unjustifiable if they were now to become part of a multi-national empire and deprived of their independence, their literary innovation initiatives and – no doubt – some of their profit.

In 1989, Chapman was duly ousted when News International mounted a successful bid for control of the company, which was then amalgamated with New York publisher Harper & Row to form HarperCollins.<sup>4</sup> Chapman had been with Collins for forty-two years.

Sixty-four, but not yet ready for pipe and slippers, Chapman then launched with his wife their own publishing house with the prestigious address Chapmans of Drury Lane. The imprint's first publication in August 1990 was WG's *The Twisted Sword*. One more WG original – *Stephanie* – followed in 1992 as well as a reprint edition of *Poldark's Cornwall* before the publishing trade's take-no-prisoners, last-man-standing consolidation grind saw the short-lived venture swallowed by Orion, who were themselves taken over by Hachette Livres in 1998.

Deeply involved in book-trade politics, Chapman was president of the Publishers' Association and a director of the Book Development Council. He maintained close links with Scotland and was the founding chairman in 1973 of Radio Clyde (now Scottish Radio Holdings) one of the earliest independent radio stations, and was on the boards of Independent Radio News, United Distillers and Scottish Opera. He was chairman of the Advisory Board of Strathclyde University Business School from 1985 to 1988 and was made an honorary doctor of literature by the University in 1990.

Chapman, who was made a CBE in 1988, was a keen golfer (he was a member of Royal Wimbledon and Walton Heath) and enthusiastic skier. Not one to wear his heart on his sleeve, Chapman was nevertheless blessed with infinite charm. Once the seemingly impassive carapace had been penetrated, he was a convivial companion and witty raconteur with a fund of good stories, some true and some apocryphal, but always elegantly delivered. His son, also Ian, followed his father into publishing whilst his daughter pursued a career in teaching.

Curtis Brown president Jonathan Lloyd said of Chapman:

*He was a chairman of Collins when they were at the top of the league and was a truly exceptional publisher and leader, and so many people – myself included – owe their careers to*

*him ... He was an extraordinarily talented man. It was very fortunate that he chose publishing as a career because he was one of those rare examples of someone who could have been Prime Minister. He could have been chief executive of almost any kind of company, so the fact that he chose publishing is to all our benefits ... He was extremely charismatic, winning over employees and writers alike. One has to remark on his presence – you felt it immediately he walked in the room. He was handsome and always immaculately dressed and a real charmer, and the staff and authors all loved and admired him. However, he was not afraid to take tough decisions, as one has to do at the top of the business. He joins a very small club in the pantheon of the Twentieth Century's Great Men of Publishing. He was a major influence in my life and that of so many others. He led a very full life, there is no question. He was one of the greats and I was very fortunate that I spent the time with him that I did. I am proud to have known him.<sup>5</sup>*

and Mark Lucas, chairman and co-founder of The Soho (literary, theatrical and talent) Agency added:

*Ian Chapman occupied an impossibly grand space in the international publishing firmament, and seemed to have done so since the dawn of time. But ... he was always prepared to give this novice his full attention, to be infinitely generous with his wisdom, and was kind enough not to glance over my shoulder in case someone more important (which means pretty much anybody) might hove into view. I did occasionally glimpse the forbidding expression that would cross his face at moments of displeasure, and felt myself fortunate never to have been the focus of its full glare, but will always remember his open-hearted smile.<sup>6</sup>*

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WG remained with Collins from 1967 until the firm was taken over in 1989 and then loyally supported Ian and Marjory in their new publishing venture

until Chapman's was sold to Orion in 1993, after which he moved on again to his sixth and last publisher, Macmillan. Collins company records held by HarperCollins, Bishopbriggs, Glasgow tell something of the twenty-two-year-long author / publisher association. Their eighteen Winston Graham files hold a large number of letters from the period 1975 to 1986 between WG, Collins, A. M. Heath, Fontana and The Bodley Head, as well as some to Random House (USA) and Book Club Associates. Sadly, however, public access to this material is currently forbidden, even with prior copyright holder permission. Though other signifiers of the close Chapman/Graham relationship are few, here are a couple:

(1) In the autumn of 1971, WG was unhappy with his American publisher, Doubleday, on two counts, believing first that their advance order of *The Spanish Armadas* was too small and second that their decision to delay publication of *The Japanese Girl* until the New Year would lose him Christmas sales. He let his Doubleday editor, Ken McCormick, know how he felt, but then roped in Mark Hamilton (his UK literary agent) and Ian Chapman to take up his case also. Hamilton wrote to Carol Brandt (WG's US literary agent), who forwarded his letter with a note of her own to McCormick, whilst Chapman wrote directly on behalf of his friend to the long-suffering editor:

*Dear Ken*

*I thought I should write to you after lunching with Winston yesterday. Once again he seems to be unhappy and a bit restless where Doubleday is concerned ...<sup>7</sup>*

In separate replies to WG, Brandt and Chapman, McCormick patiently and resolutely outlined Doubleday's position thrice over and WG was obliged to be content.<sup>8</sup>

(2) In 1986, WG published one of his best non-Poldark novels, *The Green Flash*, which took him several years and much effort to write (for more, see [FLASH](#)) and was dismayed and perplexed by the lukewarm response it provoked in reviewers and readers alike. In *Memoirs*, 2.11 the bewildered author fondly recalls Chapman's enthusiasm for the novel. After receiving the MS from his author, the Collins chairman

*took the typescript to Venice and rang me from there telling me that this was the novel he had been waiting twenty years for me to write. He said: "I hope you'll write much more, of course, but if you never write another word, this is it."*

Though it proved a view not shared by all, such encouragement must have been music to WG's ears and all the sweeter for coming from not merely a sincere friend but a man "among the most distinguished publishers of his generation".

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## NOTES AND SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> All quotes in paragraphs 1-3 from Book Two, Chapter One of WG's *Memoirs of a Private Man*, Macmillan, 2003

<sup>2</sup> Biographical data re Chapman and MacLean from (i) *The Times*, 30 November 2019 (ii) *The Glasgow Herald*, 9 December 2019 and (iii) Wikipedia

<sup>3</sup> "... although [MacLean] wouldn't comment in public about fellow writers ... he did of course hold opinions about who was who. In 1967, for example, he let slip in a letter to [Chapman] that he regarded Winston Graham as the best writer in Britain at the time. The Le Carrés, Deightons, even MacLeans, weren't in his class and 'in a few short years – without descending into our murky market-place – he will be the best-selling author in Britain.'" (From Jack Webster's *Alistair MacLean: a Life*, Chapman's, 1992)

<sup>4</sup> Remarkably, Murdoch and Chapman sprang from antecedents who not only followed the same calling but in virtually the same place, for Rupert's grandfather Patrick Murdoch was ordained a minister of the Free Church of Scotland at Cruden, just to the south of Peterhead, in 1878 whilst, a generation later, Ian's father was minister at St Fergus, just to the north.

<sup>5,6</sup> *The Bookseller*, 8 November 2019

<sup>7</sup> Letter dated 24 September 1971 in the Doubleday archive of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC



<sup>8</sup> In the event, the company ordered many more copies of *The Spanish Armades* than they could sell and only published *The Japanese Girl* at all to keep its author happy, since volumes of short stories seldom sold well. (For more, see [McCORMICK](#))

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