

THE CRAFT OF THE HISTORICAL
NOVELIST

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Author's Note

The Address I gave to the Royal Institution of Cornwall in June 1976 was intended as a more or less personal statement made to a few friends and to those members of the Institution who cared to come and hear me. For that reason, at my request, the press was excluded, and for that reason a good deal of what I said was not intended for printed publication. This extract comprises about two-thirds of the original Address.

When I was invited to give this lecture I was a little undecided on what level to treat the subject, as it was presented to me. After all, you are a learned society. On the other hand you probably want from me a personal account of my own writing rather than an academic discourse.

Perhaps I had better begin by trying to define the varieties of historical novel that exist. First, there are those that use historical personages as the chief characters in their books – such as Robert Graves's *I Claudius* and Helen Waddell's *Peter Abelard*. Secondly, there are those which use historical personages as substantial figures in their story but have as their main characters fictitious persons – very often, as it were, standing beside the historical characters – such as Rose Macauley's *They Were Defeated* and, on a more personal note, *The Grove of Eagles*. Thirdly, there are those novels which use entirely, or almost entirely, fictitious characters set in a re-created historical time – such as Stevenson's *The Black Arrow*, Blackmore's *Lorna Doone* and *The Poldarks*, for instance.

There has been a tendency in critical circles over the last 40-50 years to rate these categories in descending order of importance; i.e., the novel dealing solely with historical characters is rated higher than the novel in which historical characters play only a part; and the novel in which historical characters play a part is rated higher than that in which all the characters are fictional.

This is pretentious and arrogant rubbish. But it was given substance by the flood of ill-written tushery that burst out in the first half of this century,

in the wake, as it were, of Stevenson, Reade, Scott, Lytton and the rest, who enjoyed such a vogue in Victorian times.

But in fact you can get marvellous books in all three categories, and appalling books equally in all three. Indeed, the first category, I believe, excels all others in frightfulness when a book is bad, and the Americans are particularly prone to such perpetrations. If I had to read a bad historical novel I personally would rather read about two romantic and fictitious *beaux* crossing swords over a damsel in distress than I would about, say, Louis XV uttering phrases that were invented in Brooklyn in 1950.

Similarly, there are books in the third category which equal if they do not excel anything in the first group. I know no better historical novel than Prescott's *Man on a Donkey* or Zoe Oldenbourg's *The World is not Enough*. And what about all those classics whose authors I've referred to? Where do you put *Vanity Fair*? And what about *Wuthering Heights*? These last are often thought of as novels contemporary in their day. They were not. *Vanity Fair*, published in 1847, deals with the Napoleonic Wars. *Wuthering Heights*, also published in 1847, begins in 1801, but throws part of its narrative back to 1775.

So, having drawn those distinctions in order, I hope, to be permitted to ignore them, perhaps I may pass on to my own personal work. I am a novelist, as you know, who has lived the largest part of his life in Cornwall and who has a sort of Jekyll and Hyde *persona* so far as his work is concerned. I have alternated all my life between modern novels, usually of suspense, usually with an element of crime in them, and historical novels of a broader and more leisurely perspective. I have always found a stimulus in the reaction which turns my interest from one style to another, a refreshment and a challenge in the different problems and opportunities that each medium offers and throws up.

Now it so happens that of all my modern novels only one has been about Cornwall – and that long since suppressed by me in spite of siren calls from various publishing houses. And it so happens that of my nine historical

novels only one has *not* been about Cornwall. If you ask me for an explanation I can only refer you to a psychiatrist, for I have none myself. As you probably know, I have no Cornish blood in me. So far as I can go back I appear to be about three-quarters Lancashire, three-sixteenths Westmorland and one-sixteenth Welsh. But of course I came to Cornwall at an impressionable age, and immediately took a tremendous liking to the county.

However, for a number of years I remained an outsider, a visitor in temperament if not in fact, a person who admired its climate and its beauty but thought its people ... a little alien and its traditions a little quaint. Nothing so far as I know, nothing particular, nothing specific effected a *sudden* change in that attitude. I can point to no event, no particular friendship. It just happened that as time passed I slowly came to know the Cornish better, and I suppose they came to know me. And a sort of affinity – at least, I believe it to be an affinity – grew up.

I wonder sometimes if there is any peculiar affinity between the Cornishman and the Lancastrian in general. Certainly I see many Lancastrians living down here, but this is probably simply because they're a hard-headed lot and know a good place when they see one. There is possibly a certain similarity in their sense of humour – particularly in the hint of the grisly that lurks behind their joking ... though the Lancashire is more harsh.

One thing that happened in my case when I began to find the Cornish people less alien – indeed when many of them became my close personal friends – one thing was I was to shed for ever that strange up-country misconception that there was anything "quaint" about Cornwall, and rather to be chuckled over in a patronising way. That "Quaint old Cornish town" nonsense. In fact Helston is no quainter than Hastings or Honiton. It's just different. And perhaps more interesting.

I think I have probably over-reacted, because I have never been able to bear any of this "trade" about Cornish piskies and gnomes and the like. Indeed – and here I tread on more delicate ground – I have tended for this reason to avoid any of the more truly traditional evidences of folk-lore. It was years before anyone could persuade me to go to the Helston Furry Dance – though

when I did finally go I greatly enjoyed it. I have never been to the Padstow Hobby Horse or to a Gorsedd; nor have I ever taken any particular interest in the old Cornish language, which seems to me to be an admirable study for scholars – like Sanskrit– but not actually for revival as a living tongue in a world suffering already so much from the curse of Babel.

What I have tried to do with this sense of affinity with the Cornish is to write about them as they really are – or as I think they are – as I have known them, as I have heard about them, as I have read about them, as I have met them and liked them and laughed with them and talked to them: old miners, young rugby players, old fishermen, young lawyers, middle-aged butcher boys, clerics and farmers, doctors and dentists and dustmen. And their wives and sisters and daughters. And listened, of course.

You may well, and rightly, think that if I wanted to write about the Cornish as they really are it is strange that, of the nine novels I have written about them, all should be historical and six should be a dramatic chronicle of a family living at the end of the 18th century; but there it is. What I believe drew me to that particular period was a realisation that it held so much which has since been lost: the mines that have now gone – almost; the fishery that has now gone; the excessive parliamentary representation that has now gone; the importance of Truro as a county town in which many of the gentry had their town houses – and obviously all the other aspects of life then: the smuggling, the beach-watching for wrecks, the poverty, the rise of Wesleyanism, the beginning of banking as we now know it; and the new-rich mercantile families that grew up round smelting and the foundries.

It is impossible to say at this late date where the original inspiration of the story came from. Looking at the Poldarks now with a hyper-critical eye and thinking carefully back, it's probably true that the first half of *Ross Poldark* had something of its origins in novels I had read. Obviously a soldier coming home from the wars and finding his girl about to marry another man, and picking up a waif at a fair, discovering she's a girl when he thinks her a boy, taking her home and seeing her grow into a pretty woman who eventually becomes the heroine ...

Although I don't know of any other novel with these ingredients, they probably are not altogether original, and some prior reading may have had its influence on the sources of this work. But about half way through *Ross Poldark* a change comes over the book – not perceptible to the reader, I'm sure, but very perceptible to the writer; and thenceforward I acknowledge no derivation for something which seemed to spring totally out of my own creative guts.

I remember particularly the writing of the second book, *Demelza*. The first was written, finished, polished and polished again, many of the chapters written five times, finally done with, ready to be published; but all the characters were still milling round like worker-bees in my mind. That winter I was able to hire a wooden bungalow belonging to Mr. Harry Tremewan on the cliffs at Flat Rocks, Perranporth; and each morning I would pack a haversack with a light lunch in it, and with this slung over my shoulder I would leave my home and walk through the village and across the beach to Flat Rocks. And often the sea would be sweeping in at my feet so that I would have a job to cross the Ponsmere bridge, and I would go up to the grey old empty bungalow, and on the table gathering dust would be the reference books, the note books, the books I'd been writing in yesterday; and I would take up my pencil and for seven hours I would write and dream and write, and occasionally take a stroll outside with only the seagulls crying their lonely company. And writing that book was an organic thing. It was never planned, but it grew. The characters would genuinely work out their own destiny, yet ever be on a loose rein, sometimes with no real signposts leading ahead at all. And there would be times when things would come to a complete *impasse* and then after a frustrating struggle be off and away again ... And each night I would walk home in the gathering dusk, probably with the sea far out by then and the waves glinting like mirages over the wet sand.

It was a time of particular happiness for me, for I had been married only a few years; I had two young children, the war was just over, and life was very good. Possibly something of that comes over in the novels.

Of course the characters in the books derive in part from people I knew – more often in a composite way than in any sense a precise transcription from

life to print. Jud Paynter, for instance, the Poldarks' servant, derives about one-quarter from a Lancastrian I knew as a boy and three-quarters from a Cornishman I knew as a young man. I used to see this Cornishman cycling from his cottage to the local pub every night, and I used to wonder why he bothered to take his bicycle, as it was only a matter of about three hundred yards – until I saw him going home one night and then I realised he used his bicycle to lean on. It was another Cornishman of the same type – an acquaintance of mine – who complained to his wife that his supper the night before, when he got home, had tasted peculiar. When she went down she found he'd eaten the Kitty-Kat by mistake.

Of course it's very fine to talk of drawing your characters from life – but although it's an essential part, by itself it is simply not enough. When you describe an acquaintance – or draw a sympathetic portrait of a friend, or the unsympathetic portrait of an enemy, you are merely doing a good job of reportage. And a novelist's job is not to report, it is to create. When you take a character entirely from life that character remains objective when it should be at least largely subjective. A good writer should never just feel *with* a character, he should feel *in*. He mustn't merely describe, he must beget. Sympathy, although desirable, is not enough; there must be empathy. One can see this well in *The Forsyte Saga* – Goldsworthy's great success with the Forsytes themselves and his relative failure with his working class characters.

Just as the spiritualist medium claims to materialise a spirit by a projection from her own body, which she calls ectoplasm, so I believe many of the character creations of the great writers of fiction are projections from themselves of what might be termed literary ectoplasm.

There is, I think, one consequence of this. No novelist, however good, can beget a living character with a temperament or with characteristics which are not in accord with some facet of the author's own. It may be a small part, so small as to be barely perceptible, but it has to exist somewhere, to be drawn upon and fostered at the appropriate time. Put crudely, it's no good attempting to create the personality of a miser unless sometime in your life you've walked home ill-temperedly through the rain to save the price of a taxi – when in fact you could afford it.

So far I have talked mainly of the Poldarks and not at all of *The Grove of Eagles*, which deals, as I said, more with actual historical characters. The spark of that novel was lit long years ago when I was doing some reading for the early Poldarks. I came on a passage in an old book which referred to "one, John Killigrew, captain of Pendennis Castle, Falmouth, who in 1597 sold his castle to the King of Spain." An extraordinary statement, you'll agree – a provoking one, and one which would not let me forget it. I decided then that someday I would do the necessary research to find out the truth of it.

That would be in the late 1940s. Twelve or more years later, having done some of the research, I sat at the window of a villa in Cap Ferrat in the South of France and, looking over the brilliant blue of a Mediterranean harbour, began to describe the feelings of a fourteen-year-old boy, Maugan Killigrew, lying in his bedroom at Arwenack in 1583 and staring out at the blue smile of the waters of Falmouth Bay.

Reading in a random way, browsing in odd places, turning up the odd MS and looking through it *for pleasure*, these are of course prime essentials for any attempt to recreate a period long past. A phrase, a line, a comment, will light up a whole scene. One suddenly comes across a piece relating to old Lady Killigrew in 1596 – Heaven knows why it should have been preserved – of Lady Killigrew in 1596 trying to hire a coach and four in London to drive her back to Cornwall – a coach and four all the way to Cornwall, mark you! – and she hasn't enough money and her friends won't lend it her. And the chronicler speaks of the "tears in her eye". Knowing her a little by now, one appreciates that they must have been tears of rage. Never of weakness.

And of course I should not in my right mind *ever* have dared to write of the kidnapping of the base son of John Killigrew by Portuguese pirates from the rocks below Pendennis Castle and his being introduced as a page at the court of King Philip of Spain; never should I have dreamed of such a thing if it had not been in the *Calendar of State Papers*.

Much the same is true of the Poldarks. Reading breeds writing and writing breeds reading – and each feeds the creative impulse. The double

shipwreck at the end of Demelza, and the miners looting them on the beach, has as its basis a contemporary account. Jim Carter getting fever in prison and having blood let, and his arm festering and his dying of blood-poisoning – such an incident is related in Wesley's *Journal* in one line. The description of Launceston prison is from Howard's *State of the Prisons*. The fishbone that Dwight Enys took out of Caroline Penvenen's throat – such an incident is related by Dr. James Fordyce, who published his book on fevers in 1777. And there have been no reprints since. And so on. Only in the novel one doesn't put asterisks and notes. But as I have said, writing breeds reading and reading breeds writing, and each stimulates the other.

Now, having talked for quite a while about the actual writing, I must comment on another matter which will be fresh in your minds.

Some of you may have noticed that since the end of the Christian era – which finally occurred, I believe, about the close of the last world war – a new religion has grown up. It is the most comfortable religion there has ever been. One doesn't need to go out to it; one doesn't need to kneel uncomfortably on stuffed hassocks; one doesn't have any of those bendings and genuflections devised by Mohammed for the exercise of overweight middle-aged gentlemen; one doesn't even need the contemplative austerities of Buddhism. All one needs is an easy chair and a thing which has been described as a haunted fish tank – or, more familiarly, the Box.

Millions throughout the world worship at this shrine nightly, and its high priests, those who appear on the Box and those who work behind the scenes, wield an authority seldom equalled since the days of the Pharaohs and Amun Ra. Now about eighteen months ago the powers that be in this world offered me a sort of semi-canonisation by proposing to make a long TV serial of the first four Poldark novels. I would, they told me, be the first living author to have such a saga produced.

This was all very gratifying, and in due course the contract was signed and the serial made. Sixteen 52-minute episodes was the equivalent in length of 8 full-length feature films, and obviously there was time to do the story

justice. Whether justice was done is obviously a matter on which you will all have different opinions. I will content myself with telling you of two conversations I had during my first visit to Cornwall after the television serial was over. The first person said: "Mr. Graham, how you could have allowed them to do it, I don't know. Such distortions, I was so disgusted I could hardly watch." The second person said: "That TV serial, wasn't it superb? Wasn't it beautiful? Such acting, such production. I enjoyed every minute!"

So what you saw obviously pleased some of you and as obviously displeased others; and it may have pleased and displeased many others in differing degree – but what you saw is at least better than it might have been, even though not so good as I had been promised it should be.

The saga of course has been an enormous popular success – and not only in Cornwall and not merely among the unthinking multitudes. An ex-Attorney-General told a friend of mine that he had cancelled all Sunday evening dates while the serial was on – and he was not an exception. It has been the most successful serial since *The Forsyte Saga*.

So ... the reluctant semi-canonisation has taken place. One speculates as to why it was such a success. Because the story survived its variable treatment? Because the BBC know better than I what their audiences want? Because the sheer professionalism of the production triumphed over some of the drawbacks? Because the Cornish scene and the scenery came through undiminished? We shall never know.

If TV production needs any extenuation, then it certainly exists in the fact that making TV is a very hand-to-mouth job, in which one is operating under immense pressure of time. The whole production of this work took eleven months from beginning to end. The actual shooting took eight months. The first episode was put on the air only five months after it went into the studio. In this period not only have the scripts to be written, the production cast and the extras engaged, but costumes have to be made and fitted and sets built, music has to be composed, the cast brought together and rehearsed, and finally the episode shot. And then those scenes taken on

location have to be fitted into sequences done in the studio, alternative shots of the same scene have to be selected; then comes the cutting, a highly specialised job usually done by the director, so that a close-up can be used to illustrate a point instead of unnecessary dialogue, and finally – ultimate nightmare of nightmares – it all has to be timed so that no episode shall last longer than 53 minutes and none fall short of 51.

And all this done virtually on a shoe-string compared to the film world. Everybody is relatively badly paid – at least in comparison to the film world, in which everyone is greatly over-paid.

What of the future? As you know, another – the sixth *Poldark* – has just come out. Do I write a seventh to complete, as it were, the pattern of another three? Or is it time I returned to the modern scene? It really is high time I returned to the modern scene. I don't know.

Clearly the interest of this meeting lies chiefly in the historical novels I write. It is of course possible that there may be quite a few among you – historians of repute – who consider that the historical novel of any sort, in *anyone's* hands, is a spurious form of art, because it imposes the writer's possibly ignorant, possibly warped, possibly over-romantic view upon a past time, that it colours history in a – to them – unrealistic or unhistorical way. But much of this is true of any novel, either modern *or* historical. Any writer, any good writer, takes a set of events and imposes his own view upon them. If there is no personal view there is no art. As Cézanne said of his paintings: "I have not tried to reproduce nature, I have represented it." And this is what any good writer does. And if he is a very good writer he creates a world of his own which the reader comes to inhabit and finds it comparable with life rather than identical with it.

The historical novel at its best is not, to me, a spurious form of art, because the historical past of itself is not a shard that one can dig up and measure and piece together. No one can do this, however conscientious, because history is not an objective science. Historical truth is not mathematical truth. The past has really no existence other than that which

our minds can give it. Even the pure historian is at the mercy of his sources, and his sources are usually other fallible, or prejudiced, or forgetful human beings.

There may be a few among you who have read my one book of short stories. In it is a short story about the death and the burial of William the Conqueror. Well, all the material facts for that I got from a contemporary account by Ordericus Vitalis, which is as near as even the most conscientious historian can get to the truth of the matter. Indeed, if I had written this as an essay and punctuated it with numbers and asterisks and then notes at the bottom saying Ord. Vit. Page 231, and following with *Ibidem*, and *ib.*, *ib.*, *ib.*, people would no doubt have been more impressed. But in fact Ordericus Vitalis was thirteen when William died. In other words, he depended on an eye-witness, or possibly even hearsay, and who knows how good *his* information was?

Of course, I am not trying to equate the good historian *precisely* with the good historical novelist. Each has different aims. The latter, in pursuit of these aims, is more likely to err than the former. But each, in a subjective profession, is fallible.

And the pure historian – like the good novelist, though in a lesser degree – moulds the past, whether he intends to or not; he colours it with his own personality. All good historians set their personal impression on the past: Thucydides, Gibbon, Macauley, Froude, Rowse – go through them all, and they all do that, for it cannot be otherwise.

Probably the only way of judging a work of art is to try to measure or judge the integrity of intention. If it has that it may be a masterpiece. Or it may be a very poor and flawed work. But with such integrity it can't be all bad, and it can't be all lost.

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