

Dear Sir : WG's Letters to the Press

Between 1951 and 2000, at least 25 letters signed or co-signed by WG were published in the UK national press: fourteen in *The Times*, seven in *The Daily Telegraph*, three in *The Guardian* and one in *The Independent*. Two were written in his capacity as Chairman of the Committee of Management of The Society of Authors, two were co-signed with other authors and the remainder were penned on his own behest as a private citizen.

Below, with context as necessary, is an excerpt from each, listed chronologically:

(1) *THE DAILY TELEGRAPH*, 28 September 1951

Letter heading: **Taxing literature**

Words: 215

Sir – Mr Brophy's scheme of a 1d [i.e. one penny] levy on library books is designed to help authors – particularly young authors and old authors – to a fairer reward for their work. Such men and women, who are never likely to be lucky enough to be troubled with the problems of the best-seller, do not want governmental charity, nor do they want more pensions and more prizes awarded arbitrarily by more panels of their fellow writers.

... ..

What the author requires is recognition by the Government that in all probability he will write only one best-seller in his life and that as a consequence he should be allowed to spread his income over a much longer period, say seven years. The present concession of a three year spread, excluding royalties or any except lump sum payments, is most inadequate.

(2) *THE TIMES*, 31 July 1954

Heading: **BRIGHTER CRICKET**

Words: 253

In which WG points out the unfairness of the prevailing points allocation system when County Championship cricket matches are disrupted by rain, especially since those counties "in the western half of England always suffer the most."

Sir, - No easy solution can be found for the financial losses of the county cricket clubs in this rain-drenched summer ... but something might be done in a future year to keep a spark of enthusiasm alive in the "brighter cricket" movement by amending the championship table to take some account of the loss of time through rain ...

He goes on to propose a revised, more equitable system. WG was then a resident of Cornwall, one of cricket's "minor counties" – his team (this well before his 1960 relocation to Sussex) was presumably Lancashire.

Tinkering with the points allocation system has been a regular feature of County Championship cricket since its inception in the 1890s, although no heed seems to have been taken of WG's innovative suggestion in this letter of 1954.

(3) *THE DAILY TELEGRAPH*, 27 November 1964

Heading: **The bookseller faces risk of 'extinction'**

Words: 307

As a novelist may I point out that it is not only writers who are suffering a gross injustice under the Libraries Act? Booksellers are in some danger of being altogether extinguished.

In a small country town near my home the situation until recently was as follows: one small, excellent bookshop with a paying library and a fine selection of new books, the owners having set their faces against the fancy-goods and gramophone records departments with which many of their kind eke out a living. A most comprehensive and efficient county library existed at a 10-mile distance dealing entirely in non-fiction and fiction could be obtained in a number of small, old-fashioned buildings in villages around.

Now a fine new building, as big as an aeroplane hangar, has been put up in the centre of the town, with large display windows in which are shown luscious and unsoiled copies of the latest fiction and non-fiction to tempt borrowers in. Who is going to bother to buy a book from the bookshop, still less pay to borrow one, when this supermarket-style competitor offers everything for nothing?

... ..

... This fundamental change of policy ... must be tackled by the book trade as a whole – publishers, distributors, booksellers and authors together – if anything can be done to rectify the increasing injustice of the present position.

(4) THE GUARDIAN, 20 June 1966

Heading: none

Words: 53

In which he chides William Davis for omitting to mention in "his excellent article on what Britain does well" either publishers or authors,

some of whom, with no Government encouragement whatever and no tax concessions, earn more than three quarters of their income from abroad.

(5) THE TIMES, 4 July 1968

Heading: Knowledge and exports

Words: 79

In which, "in the name of the Society of Authors" he expresses "the deep concern which all writers must feel" regarding the Chancellor of the Exchequer's decision "not to grant book publishers the concession on S.E.T. [Selective Employment Tax] for which they have been fighting." He goes on: "It has already been pointed out in your columns that this is a tax both on knowledge and on exports ..."

(Signed as Chairman of the Committee of Management of The Society of Authors)

(6) THE TIMES, 21 March 1969

Heading: LIBRARY BOOK ROYALTIES

Words: 288

In which, again wearing his Chairman of the Committee of Management of The Society of Authors hat, he argues cogently on behalf of Public Lending Right (i.e. financial restitution made to authors whose books are loaned by public libraries, with consequent potential loss of sales): "This is not a subsidy, but payment *as of right* for the use of books in public libraries, now running at 600 million issues annually ..."

(7) THE GUARDIAN, 23 January 1970

Though Britons nowadays are used to the system of British Summer Time whereby clocks are moved forward one hour in the spring and back again in the autumn to give longer summer evenings, from 27 October 1968 to 31 October 1971 the system was abandoned in favour of British Standard Time in which the clocks remained unchanged throughout the year. During this

period, the benefits of the rival systems were widely debated. WG preferred the new regime:

Heading: That awful time

Words: 216

... The trouble is we have too little daylight in the winter anyhow. People in Inverness must go to work in the dark at this time of year whether we return to Greenwich Time or not ... If for statistical reasons it is finally decided that the hideous dreariness of dark afternoons must come back, then do let it be for a maximum of only two months – say, December 1 to February 1 – and not a clamping down of black winter from October until March.

This is the first of three letters – see also (16) and (18) below – addressing an issue about which WG clearly felt strongly.

(8) THE TIMES, 27 April 1973

In *The Times* of 29 March 1973, Bernard Levin noted that, thanks to "a loophole" in the country's 200-year-old copyright legislation, while a playwright is protected against the performance of his plays without payment to him, a composer against free performances of his music and a performer against unrewarded broadcasts of his work, the author whose books are repeatedly loaned free of charge by public libraries gets nothing beyond one royalty for the original (usually discounted) sale of the book to the library.

But though the government had conceded in 1972 the merit of the case for some form of recompense for this anomaly, disagreement among writers concerning the fairest way of implementing such a scheme was impeding progress towards a resolution. Alternative proposals were backed by The Society of Authors on one side and Writers Action Group (WAG) on the other. For the next six weeks, letters in *The Times* argued matters back and forth; on 27 April, WG was moved to have his say:

Heading: **Public lending right**

Words: 188

Sir, Just to put the record – and Mr James Reeves – straight, the present inequitable scheme, as he calls it ... was not "cooked up" between the Society of Authors and the Arts Council. In its essentials it was first put forward by a senior civil servant at an "all-interested-parties" meeting at the Department of Education on July 1, 1969, under the chairmanship of Miss Jennie Lee ...

(9) THE TIMES, 16 May 1973

At a ballot held on 26 April to elect four members to the Society of Authors management committee, WAG fielded four candidates to stand against the Society's four nominees in an attempt to use the democratic process to change the Society's views from within. Despite an unfortunate counting error which led to an initial declaration of incorrect tallies, the ballot duly, fairly and correctly, returned one WAG and three Society candidates.

However, in a letter published in *The Times* on 10 May, WAG's Maureen Duffy and others first accused the Society's management committee, by supporting the "unjust" PLR scheme "proposed in the Working Party report", of "leading literature to suicide" before deriding their "correct and true account" of a ballot result that recorded 679 more votes cast than could have been submitted. This led to a starchy response, published on 16 May, from Society Chairman Geoffrey Trease, to which WG and seven other authors also appended their names:

Heading: **Public lending right**

Words: 305

[The error] had occurred because an incomplete running total, taken at one stage of the count, was inadvertently included in the final total of votes ... While the committee obviously regrets

the need for emendation, it takes the strongest possible exception to any imputed slur on the integrity of its officers ...

The long campaign – see (6) above – by SOA, WAG *et al.* led to passage in 1979 of *The Public Lending Right Act* (though even this was not implemented until 1982). WAG's argument – that the scheme should be funded centrally by the tax payer rather than being devolved to libraries (who, after paying PLR, would have less money to spend on books) – prevailed.

(10) THE GUARDIAN, 11 August 1975

Heading: none

Words: 71

Sir, – In view of the Arctic winter we suffered in this country ... and ... of the chill, damp summer we are now enduring, is it not time for a further article in the Guardian, or other learned journal, describing the inexorable move downwards of the Polar ice cap?

(11) THE TIMES, 15 January 1983

Heading: **Cornish wreckers**

Words: 221

Sir, In your third leader on Saturday ... referring to the dubious behaviour of the people of Hartland, you repeat the usual stories about West Country wrecking in the past, and then add: "Active wrecking was... perhaps always more a matter of legend than fact." I wonder if it might be possible to separate the two? The stripping of ships when they came ashore ... is plain fact ... but the active inducement of wrecks by the deliberate waving of false lights has no such evidence or even reliable hearsay to support it ... Parson Hawker (the man) mainly responsible for ... these lurid legends ... "never lets facts or the absence of them stand in the way of his imagination."¹

(12) *THE TIMES*, 29 October 1984

Heading: **VAT on books**

Words: 148

Sir, Last year, when I was talking to a member of the Government, amiably pressing on him the desirability of taking VAT off the live theatre, he replied: "Do you want us to subsidise [Soho strip club] the Raymond Revuebar?" Similar arguments are no doubt being put to the Chancellor as to why he should subsidise (by failing to tax) the paperback trash that appears today on many bookstalls ... The ungodly will always flourish, and a VAT would hardly worry them at all. The introduction of what would be in its effect a Philistine tax would simply make life very much harder for the good author, a good publisher, and the good bookseller.

Value Added Tax or VAT was introduced in the UK in 1973. Books (except ebooks) are zero-rated now (2017) and always have been.

(13) *THE DAILY TELEGRAPH*, 30 August 1985

Heading: **Better English**

Words: 102

In your third leader (Aug. 22) you write in the last paragraph of someone being "overly aggressive." Why "overly" and not "over"? All that can be said of "overly" is that it is ungrammatical, American and fashionable.

In the same paragraph, referring to unexemplary behaviour on the cricket field, you say "one would not want to see these men crucified for their alleged offences." This absurd hyperbole is also becoming fashionable. At this rate children will soon be talking of being crucified for not doing their homework.

Could we please have a pause for better English – at least in your leader columns?

(14) THE TIMES, 21 December 1987

Heading: Nature's moods

Words: 58

Sir, On Saturday, December 12, I picked five fine camellias flowering without shelter in spite of the low day temperatures and the hard night frosts ... One wonders if nature is trying to make up.

Make up for what? WG is referring to the hurricane of 16 October 1987 which caused widespread damage and some loss of life across large areas of southern and eastern England, as well as the Channel Islands and northern France, and left WG's beloved garden looking like "a cross between Flanders fields and a timber yard".

(15) THE INDEPENDENT, 16 December 1988

Heading: Freedom at Collins

Words: 211

Dear Sir,

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

In publishing, a relationship builds up between an author and his publisher ... 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 had always been argued that these firms were underfunded, overstaffed or inefficient.

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.

Editorial note: The writer is the author of the Poldark series, published by Collins.

(16) THE DAILY TELEGRAPH, 5 January 1989

The "hopeful possibility" cited in the first paragraph of this letter refers to the then latest (1987-88) Government review of the vexed question of whether to revert through the winter months to Greenwich Mean Time or to remain on British Summer Time (i.e. GMT plus 1 hour) throughout the year. Eventually published in 1989, Government Green Paper *Summer Time: A Consultation Document* invited further comment on three proposed options, the second of which, "Single / Double Summer Time" – i.e. GMT plus one hour in winter and GMT plus two hours through the summer – would surely have suited WG very well, but the third and least radical of which, "Retaining the *Status Quo*", eventually prevailed.

Heading: Embowelled darkness

Words: 138

... Not many months ago it seemed at least a hopeful possibility that there would be no end to (British Summer Time) in 1989 and that it would be continued throughout the year, thus avoiding the worst embowelled darkness of winter afternoons.

Since then, nothing at all appears to have happened. In the last few years we have been instructed by the great and the good to buy our petrol by the litre, our carpets by the metre, our sugar by the gram and to look on 20 Centigrade as something we used to know as 68 Fahrenheit, all in the interests of European harmonisation. Do we not deserve at least one useful change whose merits, apart from Scotland, are patently obvious?

(17) THE TIMES, 28 February 1989

Many Muslims considered Salman Rushdie's prize-winning fourth novel *The Satanic Verses* a blasphemous mockery of their faith. The outrage that followed its publication in 1988 led to the declaration on 14 February 1989 by Ayatollah Khomeini, then Supreme Leader of Iran, of a *fatwah* calling for the death of Rushdie and his publishers. The Society of Authors expressed their collective concern:

Heading: 'The Satanic Verses'

Words: 96

Sir, While regretting that many Muslims have been offended by The Satanic Verses, we have been appalled by the order of the Ayatollah Khomeini to assassinate Salman Rushdie and his publishers ...

WG was one of 28 authors to sign this letter.

(18) THE DAILY TELEGRAPH, 8 November 1990

Heading: Shorten black winter

Words: 130

At the beginning of five months of black afternoons one reflects that, in spite of statistics which show that children are more at

risk on dark afternoons than on dark mornings, the Government has presumably shied away from further alienating the voters of northern Britain in the run-up to an election ...

Might there not be room instead for an experiment ... of a reduced period of Greenwich time? It could last, say, three months from mid-November to mid-February. This would disarm the "darkness at noon" critics and at the same time be a less fearsome prospect for those people who want and need light late in the day.

(19) THE TIMES, 13 November 1991

Heading: Funny old world

Words: 163

Sir, I was depressed by the centre pages of Saturday's Times. First, a leading article supporting – on some strange egalitarian grounds – the move to make subfusc [i.e. a gown over dull clothes] no longer compulsory at Oxford on a few formal occasions, when already for 99% of the time undergraduates may dress like refugees, and often do ...

He goes on to complain about Philip Howard criticising Marks & Spencer "for trying to please the purists by being grammatical" and the tendency of young nurses to address the very old "by their Christian names at first meeting" before concluding:

One does not have to dislike change to prefer the maintenance of a few of the older standards.

(20) THE DAILY TELEGRAPH, 26 August 1992

Commenting in *The Daily Telegraph* on unauthorised biographies with particular reference to poet Stephen Spender, who not only spoke out against

them but used the law to suppress one's publication, Kirsty McLeod wrote: "As for the great man himself: be he painter or writer, he has – despite what Spender says – been trying to draw attention to himself from the very moment he first picked up a paintbrush or wielded a pen." This provoked "private man" WG to respond:

Heading: **Writer's privacy**

Words: 120

... She does not seem to understand the vital difference between a creative artist and his work. Every writer and painter needs and wants his work noticed: it is his life's blood. Some, too, may be self-seeking exhibitionists, but many are not. Miss McLeod's argument would seem to differ little from the justification which every tabloid journalist gives for his revelations.

(21) THE TIMES, 23 July 1994

Opera-buff WG preferred traditional rather than *avant-garde* productions and twice petitioned – see also (25) below – for the introduction of a system similar to that used to rate hotels in *The Michelin Guide*, that would allow him to be more discriminating (by being better informed) when booking seats months ahead of the actual performance:

Heading: **Glyndebourne choice**

Words: 105

Sir, The Guide Michelin ... enables the traveller to avoid what he wants to avoid.

Glyndebourne patrons ... would be aided, and a great deal of frustration and disappointment avoided, if the advance programme inserted ... M [for modernity] in front of operas which were to be the subject of experimental or very modern staging.

(22) THE TIMES, 2 February 1996

Heading: **Here today**

Words: 87

... Last Friday ... a snow shower dumped at least six inches of snow on this area of Sussex ... By Sunday at 2pm it was almost gone ... Somehow, the snow did not melt; it evaporated. How?

(23) THE TIMES, 16 October 1998

Heading: **Privatised trains 'are on right track'**

Words: 190

... I live in the darkest corner of darkest Sussex where road conditions have scarcely improved since the end of the Second World War and the rail service has steadily deteriorated ... The line by the early Nineties had become almost derelict and the electric part ... was in a sorry state ... [After describing post-privatisation improvements] The people of this neighbourhood are certainly converts to privatisation.

(24) THE TIMES, 24 April 2000

After fatally stabbing a Detective Constable whom he had discovered carrying out surveillance in the grounds of his home, in December 1985 career criminal and police informer Kenneth Noye was acquitted of murder on the grounds of self-defence. In April 2000, some eight months after he had shot dead a burglar in his home, Norfolk farmer Tony Martin was convicted of murder, which moved WG to comment. After recalling the dismay caused by the Noye verdict in (Metropolitan Police Service HQ) Scotland Yard, he turned to the more recent case:

Heading: **'Sense of injustice' at Martin verdict**

Words: 148

... This week a farmer has been sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of a young burglar who broke into his house ... No doubt there are differences in circumstance [between the Noye and Martin cases], but I am unclear what they are. A conviction of manslaughter against the farmer with a 12-month prison sentence would have prevented the passionate sense of injustice which many people at present feel, and would leave instead the impression that a commonsense justice had been done.

(25) THE DAILY TELEGRAPH, 12 September 2000

This letter repeats and slightly develops the theme of (21) above.

Heading: Modern Mozart

Words: 148

SIR - Now that the dust is settling over Glyndebourne for another year, it may be worth speculating as to whether the SAM (Society for the Assassination of Mozart; founder member Antonio Salieri) is still thriving in our midst. What else explains the recent production of Don Giovanni? ... Inviting an audience to subscribe blindfold in January for a production in August seems to infringe the Trade Descriptions Act. If preliminary programmes sent out at the beginning of each year were clearly marked with an M for modern, or an E for experimental, then those who apply would have less cause for genuine complaint.

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ADDENDUM (26) THE SPECTATOR, 5 April 1940

In *The Spectator* of 29 March 1940, Janus's "A Spectator's Notebook" column included the following paragraph:

Readers of advertisements of a certain brand of cigarettes are diverted, or are meant to be, by aphorisms allegedly Oriental and epigrammatic in form and prefaced by the mendacious affirmation, "Confucius say." Now I see a London daily paper is borrowing the idea, which has had an interesting history. Its originator was Walter Winchell, the well-known American columnist, who began adorning his column with Confucianisms (e.g., "Confucius say 'girl with future should beware of man with past'") towards the end of 1938. It caught on surprisingly. Collections of Confucianisms were sold on the New York streets, a "Confucius say" song was warbled and whistled through the forty-eight States of the Union, a "Confucius say" dress was worn by a mannequin at the Sport and Work Apparel Show in Chicago. And Mr. Winchell's enterprising Press agent hired a couple of Chinese, infuriated at the insult to their national sage (actually waiters in a Chinese restaurant), to arm themselves with dagger and chopper and chase the columnist across Miami Beach – with a photographer, of course, in the offing. Now Mr. Winchell has got tired of Confucianisms and given them up. But they are still, it appears, good currency this side.

This drew from WG the following response, published on 5 April:

Heading: "CONFUCIUS, HE SAY ..."

Words: 109

Sir, – The "Confucius, he say ..." advertisements mentioned in "A Spectator's Notebook" seem to me to raise a point of taste. One is left wondering whether people would consider it desirable if a Chinese merchant were to insert in the newspapers a picture of a fat bearded Jew with the caption "Jesus Christ would have enjoyed this tea."

"Janus's" account of the origin of the idea might almost have been guessed. We can learn a lot from America. But it is to be hoped that we are proof against that peculiar American

infection which can make a craze out of pole-squatting, or the infantile bubblings of nit-wit columnists.

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NOTE

¹ Robert S. Hawker (1803-1875) was an Anglican priest, poet, West Country antiquarian and alleged eccentric who, from 1836 until his death, was vicar of Morwenstow, a parish on the north Cornish coast between Bude and Clovelly. A collection of Hawker's prose sketches was published in 1870 as *Footprints of Former Men in Far Cornwall*. The book's fifth chapter, The Remembrances of a Cornish Vicar, includes these lines:

*Among my parishioners there were certain individuals who might be termed representative men ... One of these had been for full forty years a wrecker – that is to say, a watcher of the sea and rocks for flotsam and jetsam, and other unconsidered trifles which the waves might turn up to reward the zeal and vigilance of a patient man. His name was Peter Burrow, a man of harmless and desultory life, and **by no means identified with the cruel and covetous natives of the strand, with whom it was a matter of pastime to lure a vessel ashore by a treacherous light, or to withhold succour from the seaman struggling with the sea.***

Incidentally, later in the same chapter, Hawker records a local saying:

*Save a stranger from the sea
And he'll turn your enemy*

which surely influenced WG's choice of title for his eighth (1981) Poldark novel.

Footprints of Former Men in Far Cornwall was republished in 1893 with some additional content, then again in 1903 with a Preface by C. E. Byles, who wrote:

There is an element of fiction in Hawker's biographical studies. He never let facts, or the absence of them, stand in the way of his imagination, and he had a Chattertonian habit of passing off compositions of his own as ancient manuscripts.

These are the lines from which WG quotes in his letter of 15 January 1983 to the *Times*.

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