

FOUR FOREWORDS

(1) From *A Poldark Quartet*, Collins Collectors' Choice, 1980

My parents moved to Cornwall from the north of England when I was seventeen. The change to me was an extreme one: this sudden transfer from the suburb of a big city to a small windswept Cornish village made a very deep impression, and as a result I came to take in more of the 'atmosphere' than if I had been naturally born into it. In a city green things grow reluctantly, flowers are tidy and trim, the weather is just a peripheral nuisance – or benefaction – the sky is of little importance somewhere above the tops of the houses and the trees. In Cornwall everything was lush: weeds and grasses fought together with campion and wild garlic; gorse rioted; bluebells and cow parsley overflowed the hedges. And the weather was omnipresent: wind and rain and monumental cloud; glinting sun and washed blue skies; with the tramp of the great surf never far away and the seagulls crying. The house where we lived was a mile up the valley from the village, and at the appropriate seasons the lane was noisy with crickets and lit with glow-worms.

But although I began to write very early, and found a publisher who was brave enough – and rash enough – to publish me, I did not write about Cornwall for quite a time. This was because, although I instantly took to the scene, I did not quickly get to know the Cornish people. I remained an outsider, a visitor in temperament if not in fact. It took a number of years, and I can think of nothing in particular, no single event, no special friendship that produced the change. It just happened that as time passed I came to know the Cornish people and I suppose they came to know me. And at this stage I believe an affinity grew up.

It was soon after this that the Poldarks began to take shape.

It may be thought that I could – and should – have written about the county as I found it then; but my attention turned to the eighteenth century because it held so much that since has been lost to Cornwall: 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 houses; and all the 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 families that grew up around the smelting and the foundries.

The Poldarks were never planned as a saga but grew and multiplied around a single central theme – one theme spanning the first four novels, the triangle of Ross, Demelza and Elizabeth; and one spanning the last three novels, the parentage of Valentine. What *was* planned was that it should cover an area of life and society in breadth rather than by the passage of time. Books which begin with the heroine at nineteen and end with her at ninety do not seem to me to show inventiveness but to betray the lack of it.

During the writing of part of these novels I was able to hire a small wooden bungalow entirely isolated on the cliffs, and each morning I would pack a haversack with a light lunch, and with this slung over my shoulder I would walk through the village and across the beach. At full tide the sea would be sweeping at my feet and it would be difficult to get across the planks that served for a bridge over the small, swollen river. Thence to the empty bungalow, and on the table gathering dust would be the reference books, the manuscripts, the notebooks and the books I'd been writing in yesterday. So I'd sit alone and write for six or seven hours, and when it came time to return in the gathering dusk the sea would be far out and the waves glinting like mirages over the wet sand.

As to the characters, I have tried to write about the Cornish with the affection and the affinity I feel for them but without sentimentality. I have written of them as I have known them, as I have read about them, as I have met them and laughed with them and talked with 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, too. Above all, listened.

Some of the characters in the books derive in part from people I have known, though more in a composite way than in 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 of his life, and I used to wonder why he bothered to take his bicycle as it was only a matter of some two hundred

yards – until I saw him going home one night, and then I realized he used his bicycle to lean on.

So, too historical fact intrudes on these books. The double shipwreck at the end of DEMELZA, and the miners looting the ships on the beach, comes from a contemporary account of two such wrecks on Perranporth beach in the seventeen-nineties. The tragedy of a man like Jim Carter is related in Wesley's Journals, but in a single line. The description of Launceston Prison is from Howard's STATE OF THE PRISONS (1777). The voting procedure in Bodmin is a description of an actual election. The incident in JEREMY POLDARK in which Dwight Enys is called to see Caroline Penvenen because it is believed she has the morbid sore throat, and what he really finds, is related by a Dr James Fordyce in a book on fevers which had a limited circulation in 1789.

Since 1975 television, aided by some admirable young actors, has of course added a new dimension to these books.

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(2) From *The Poldark Cookery Book* by Jean M. Graham, Triad / Granada, 1981

Every novelist should know and thoroughly understand what he is writing about. If in doubt, he must discover enough, either by personal experiment or by close attention to what others tell him or have written, to speak with sufficient authority to convince the reader. Thus he often discovers far more about the subject than he needs. It's a bit like the iceberg: the nine-tenths under water is necessary to support the one-tenth that shows.

But sometimes one's ignorance (or is it innocence?) is preserved by the existence of someone close to oneself (such as a wife) whose knowledge on a subject is such that there is no need to learn. This applies to my cooking. I have never cooked. There has always been someone at my side who could do it better and enjoyed doing it. Nor have I ever needed to inquire from others or to read about it from different sources. I am able to describe the making of bread in *The Black Moon* because my wife tells me how it is done.

Of course my wife's knowledge is relatively modern, but all through she has shown an innate flair for how cooking and serving would be approached two hundred years ago.

As to the composition of the meals in the novels – the menus if you like – this has been a sort of collaboration between her and myself and the writers of the time. Historians as such are rarely forthcoming about food: they tend to brush it aside in a couple of paragraphs, Diarists, having experienced – or suffered – it at first hand, pay it much more attention. From the original William Hickey's scathing remarks about the inns of Falmouth, to Staniforth's visit to Lord de Dunstanville at Tehidy – not to mention Boswell's; from Jenkyn's *News from Cornwall* to James Silk Buckingham's comments on his brief stay in the county, all have helped to contribute to our knowledge of the food and menus of the time. So of course does Polwhele – there are fewer pleasanter sentences than that in which he writes: 'Returned home to my wife and drank very agreeable tea with her sweetened with kisses.' Werner, Moritz, Simond, Dudley Rider, Christopher Wallis, the Torrington Diaries, are informative to a greater or lesser extent. And there are recipes and menus from the great houses of Cornwall – to be found in the County Records Office – which never achieved the permanence of print but are none the worse for that.

The over-all impression is of the quantity of food consumed. Almost everybody over-ate and over-ate outrageously. A table plan in those days did not merely indicate where the guests were to sit, it gave precise instructions as to where each dish was to be placed, like Wellington disposing of his divisions before a battle. The expression that the table 'groaned under the weight of food' could have been literally true.

Sir Frederick Eden in his *State of the Poor* (1797) shows the other side of the picture. His recipe for Hasty Pudding is '13 ozs of oatmeal in a quart of water, salted, with a little beer or milk poured over it. This will provide a sufficient meal for two labourers.'

Sir Frederick also deplored the spread of tea-drinking among the labouring

classes, observing that 'those who can't get malt liquor consume in excess the deleterious product of China.' He was not, however, an unsympathetic man and argued, 'How can the Rich justify their exclusive property in the common heritage of mankind unless they consent in return to provide for the sustenance of the Poor, who were excluded from those common rights by the laws of the Rich, to which they were never parties?'

One of the staple dishes of the very poor in Cornwall was known as 'Sky blue and Sinkers.' For this, water was put in a three-legged crock and heated over a fire of gorse and turf until it reached boiling point. Some flour, usually barley, was mixed in a basin with scalded milk, emptied in the crock and allowed to boil for a minute or so. This was then poured into basins for the family, and sops of barley bread dropped in. These sops sank to the bottom and were the 'sinkers'. The diluted milk liquid had a bluish tinge which was the 'sky'.

It's interesting to note that when conditions improved, either generally or for a particular family, it was the ingredients which were improved, not the basic recipe. Indeed, almost up to the present day, a popular dish in Cornwall, particularly at bed-time, has been 'Kettlebroth' or 'Kiddley', which consists of pieces of bread, preferably crusty, cut into large squares and put into a basin and covered with boiling water, to which is added half a cup of fresh cold milk, a big lump of butter and salt and pepper.

Perhaps of all printed commentators of the day, Parson Woodforde is the most detailed as to food – not, admittedly, as to how the cook operated, but as to what appeared on his and other people's tables. James Woodforde, of course, lived in Norfolk not in the West Country, but he notes painstakingly what he ate, whether it was good, and often whether it agreed with him. An example taken almost at random reads:

'I won at cards this evening 5/-. We had a very genteel Dinner and Desert after. The first Course was Fish, a piece of rost Beef, Pork Stakes, soup, hashed Calf's Head, a boiled Fowl and Pigg's Face – Second Course was stewed Sweetbreads, a fore Quarter of Lamb

rosted, Jellies, Custards, Lemon Cream, Syllabub and Blancmange. Desert – Oranges, Pistachio Nuts and blanched Almonds and Raisins, and preserved Cherries ... Afterwards my niece was not very well.'

Books on cookery were far from scarce even in those days. *The London Cook* by William Gelleroy was to be found in one or two of the great houses of Cornwall. Farley's *The London Art of Cookery* had reached its tenth edition by 1804. Verral's *The Cook's Paradise* and Mrs. Glasse's *The Art of Cookery made Plain and Easy* were frequently reprinted. A book published in 1828 opens with an apology for being 'yet another cook book'.

Well, a century and a half later, this is 'yet another cook book'. I hope it may prove both useful and entertaining. But a last word. Cookery books are the sheet music of the world of food. A lot still depends on the skill and interpretation of the individual musician.

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(3) From *Schoonerman* by Captain Richard England, The Bodley Head, 1981

I have never met Richard England, though had events moved more happily for us both – as will be related in this book – we might now be old friends. As it is, I can only recommend *Schoonerman* in the way it should most properly be recommended, without prejudice or personal involvement; and this I most heartily do.

In an age when the amateur sailor, the week-end sailor, the holiday sailor ever proliferates, so that bright new marinas flourish in every little port, and men and women take to the sea for pleasure or to escape from the problems of the land, and vie with each other to pit their varying skills against wind and wave, it is fascinating to read an account written by one of the last true professionals in the harsh world of the coastal schooner trade. For him the sea has indeed been The Cruel Sea. Yet all his vicissitudes in small and vulnerable sailing vessels, his struggles with obstinate, difficult and fractious human beings, his efforts to break through the stifling red tape of the official

world, the hardships that constantly beset him, are related with an absence of bitterness and rancour that compel admiration.

There is indeed in this book, although it is a recital of unrelenting struggle, a sense of dedication and happiness, as if Captain England and his wife and daughters achieved a contentment and unity in spite of it all and that, looking back on those days, he finds a real pleasure in the telling and only once the pain.

From any point of view this book must surely be looked on as a valuable record of a time now gone for ever, a vivid yet factual record that carries conviction. It was really like this, one thinks, and it will never come again. As the author remarks at a tragic point in his narrative: *Sic Transit Gloria Mundi*.

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(4) From *The Spirit Of England* by Simon McBride, Webb & Bower Limited in association with Michael Joseph Limited, 1989

*Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*

Thus said Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who knew a thing or two.

It is the responsibility and the pleasure – or should be – of every poet, artist, photographer, writer to see 'the burning bush', as it were, and to convey to his readers, gazers, critics, admirers, something of the world of nature or human nature, which he personally discerns and can offer specially to them. After he has spoken, or depicted it, as best he can, there are, one hopes, more people taking off their shoes and fewer just plucking the blackberries.

In observing the work of a fine photographer like Simon McBride one learns to see things through his eyes and not one's own. Often they are the familiar things which are so well known as to be taken for granted: fields, trees, mountains, fells, lakes, waterfalls. He observes them afresh; and in discovering a new sight one discovers a new beauty.

I first met him in 1981, when the book *Poldark's Cornwall* was projected, and it was suggested that as I provided the text he should provide the illustrations to the text. At this time I knew nothing of his background. Now I know that he comes of Lancashire, Irish and Cornish stock, that he left England with his parents when a year old and lived in Kenya until he was thirteen, when he came back to England to school. By then the African scene was firmly implanted and he has since returned many times. While training as a graphic designer in England he came to the conviction that photography was to be his main preoccupation in life, and when a friend sent him an air ticket to return to Africa – to Rhodesia, as it then was – it offered him the opportunity to develop his twin interests together; and he stayed there for three years as a press photographer. Back in England he took a degree in African Studies at London University, then he returned to Africa once more, covering the wars in Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique – and the riots in Soweto.

In 1980 he married, and by the time I met him he was settled in the West Country as an independent and freelance photographer.

After a preliminary meeting in London to discuss the book I saw him next in Cornwall in the summer of 1982. My wife and I were on holiday and the weather had been frightful; but one day, which had dawned burdened with the direst, most ominous forecasts of the weather men, had turned contrarily first into fitful and then blazing sunshine, with a rising sea, air like cool wine; bliss. Simon discovered us in our secret cove, the only couple visible, in bathing costumes, soaking up the sun. He wobbled down the precipitous path burdened with cameras, and at first was put out by a rash of caravans disfiguring the distant view. We all sat talking until the long day was near its end, and so climbed the path; then he and I strolled along the cliffs and down to the next unspoiled cove, where he took many more pictures of sea and sun and cliff and me and corrugated sand.

The following day, when the weather had returned to type, we toured round Cornwall, also the day after that, when his indefatigable energy and determination never to be satisfied with second best were much in evidence. During that summer and autumn he must have often returned to Cornwall, but then alone, seeking out the places I had mentioned in the book but seeking to create his own synthesis.

Recently a cynic said that a few generations ago England had been a country of beauty, now it was becoming a country of beauty spots. This book, *The Spirit of England*, I think disproves it. All the pictures are modern – taken, that is, within the last six years – and they show the extraordinary diversity of scene and mood and interest that such a small island can contain; and illustrate that so much is as yet unspoiled and some at least, thank God, unspoilable.

Simon is a loner, and there is a marked absence of human beings in the photographs in this book. He likes to work alone and to have long periods to himself, particularly when hunting the scene he is going to shoot. He talks to himself and the sky and the countryside, persuading them to arrange themselves to suit his mood. Design is in all of them, as in all good paintings, an arrangement that comes into being and settles into perpetuity when the camera at last clicks. In some of these pictures there is a sense of foreboding, as if a brooding scene had sparked off his own dark mood and fused with it.

But the drama of lowering skies, of mountainous waves, of lonely moors, of spouting fountains merging with stormy sun-shot clouds, can give way to the tranquillity of streams and shimmering lakes and the homeliness of thatched cottages and the fishing boat's return. For Simon is no misanthrope and can enjoy as well as anyone the company of his fellow men. And when he chooses humanity for his subject, whether it is a black baby rolling in the straw in Zimbabwe or a Cornish miner dirty and cheerful after a day's chore, he brings the same talent to bear on it, the artistic eye which goes so far beyond mere expertness.

Look at these pictures and study and enjoy them all, for it is a remarkable collection which should establish Simon McBride as one of the foremost photographers of today.

It's really all in what Mrs Browning said, and she said it again in another poem, even more explicitly.

*The poet hath the child's sight in his breast
And sees all new: what oftenest he has viewed
He views with the first glory.*

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