

(i) *The Novelist at Work*: an address given by WG in 1937

In the spring of 1936, WG's closest friend Fred Harris invited the author (then with three published novels to his name) to address the Camborne Literary Society on the subject of THE NOVELIST AT WORK. Despite the diffident WG's reservations, the talk was enough of a success that he was persuaded to reprise it to audiences in Penzance and at least one other venue in February and March of 1937 (by which time he had published four novels and was about to publish a fifth).

The draft he wrote for the first speech was re-used, after revision, for the second and third with the result that the document which survives in Truro's RIC archive is a fascinating amalgam of all three. Rather than try to disentangle earlier and later thoughts, I have attempted below to present a coherent reconstruction of the whole – although certain marginalia which would have meant something to the speaker but convey little to me (e.g. "Frank Swinnerton, recent autobiography"; "Galsworthy and swaddling clothes"; "E. Phillips Oppenheim, 1887"; "Flaubert and the cabbage field" etc) have been ignored.

Since WG wrote the draft in abbreviated fashion – Shall always look back to that time certain pleasure – I have fleshed his words out into the kind of sentences – I shall always look back to that time with a certain pleasure – he might have spoken.

What follows is not a verbatim record of those long-ago nights, but does hopefully catch some trace of their faint echo...

I think I might begin with something in the nature of an explanation, and an apology. When Mr Harris originally asked me to give a talk to the Camborne Literary Society on my novels with particular reference to *John Rowe*, I reluctantly agreed, knowing that most of the people I was to talk to would have had time to make some acquaintance with the book in question. My reluctance stemmed from the fact that, although by now reasonably used to writing about novels, I am not at all used to talking about them, or how they are written, which is a very different thing.

Indeed, I have made it my practice not to inquire too closely into the machinery of writing. Self-consciousness is good in an author in some degree but if overdone is liable to prove a serious check on the fluidity of his work. With a few notable exceptions, self-consciousness of this kind has been notably and happily lacking in English authors.

The title of this talk is The Novelist at Work. I feel that in order to justify this I should be able to produce a scale model of myself complete with buttons A and B. I don't propose to do that, but do suggest that the principal merit of a talk like this – if it has any at all – will lie in the fact that such observations on my own work as I may offer will be straight from the horse's mouth and, as such, have the same merit as all reliable stable information.

One could consider the subject of novel writing academically; there are books on the subject, notably Lubbock's *Craft of Fiction*, Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* and C. Henry Warren's *The Writer's Art*, all of which – certainly the first two – deal more exhaustively and completely with that side than I could hope to do in the time at my disposal. But, so far as other novelists are concerned, except for the occasional reminiscences of a few writers I have met, you are on an equal footing with me. Many of you may have read Henry James's big book on the subject, Arnold Bennett's diaries, Somerset Maugham's prefaces, Rudyard Kipling's witty but all too brief comments in his recently-published autobiography *Something of Myself*. Those and a hundred other such books are available. Only so far as my own writing is concerned can I offer you something which is not at the moment retailed at the bookshop priced 3/6 and, if I have anything to do with it, never will be.

So, how does a novelist come to graduate into the profession of writing? Does he say majestically "Let there be a novel" as who would say "Let there be light" and there was light? Or does he have some secret, fixed plan to act upon, some infallible formula for their production, as two parts of hydrogen and one of oxygen invariably produce water? Or is it something of a cross between the two, a product of impulse and rule and precept in varying degree?

From my own experience in writing a number of stories, certain broad principles have evolved, but it would be a mistake to regard them as hard and fast rules – indeed, no two of my novels were hatched, planned or written in precisely the same way. That notwithstanding, no novel can be regarded as a distinct and separate accomplishment without threads of

thought connecting it to those preceding it and following. Thus to give an account solely of the planning and writing of *John Rowe* would be to show only one side of a many-sided figure. Perhaps the best approach, therefore, is to give an account of my writing in general, leading up to and then including *John Rowe*. So, now – with apologies – the story of my life.

My efforts at writing began at an early age, so the actual desire to write is not traceable back to any special date. At six I dictated a story: "*Oh look,*" said Tom to his sister, "*here is a dead man on the doorstep.*" *And there were footsteps in the snow.* It was a story of no great length, but looking back on my own childish efforts and those of other children, I am struck by the force of the writing, for all its crudeness. There is a certain starkness, a Biblical brevity and directness. At six it comes straight from the heart and, speaking from personal experience, compares favourably with mid-teen efforts cluttered with clichés, long words, general prolixity and attempts at so-called literary English. After all, with the possible exception of *Malice Aforethought*, I cannot think of any thriller with a more arresting opening than the childish example I've just quoted.

Soon after growing out of my teens I began to think out the plot of my first novel. Previous to that I had been somewhat unduly encouraged by my success in selling short articles and sketches. I had also started an abortive novel and written about half a dozen short stories, quite rightly returned by editors. But now I broke quite away from all that and began a fresh novel in real earnest – and a tremendous hurry. Why? Because of a youthful desire to make my name in a week; also, a powerful urge I could not control to begin a story.

The main framework of the plot of this novel (which became *The House with the Stained Glass Windows*, my first published) was only visible in parts and its characters were thin and nebulous; a few incidents stood out as landmarks towards which I ploughed my way through a sort of uncharted desert. After 75,000 words in five weeks, it petered out because, although mentally fresh enough, I was physically exhausted. I slept with the book, dreamt of it, didn't leave the house. It was the nearest approach to the blood and tears in which first novels are generally supposed to be written that you could imagine.

But despite the growing pains, I shall always look back to that time with a certain pleasure, because, as I wrote, the nebulous characters which had been just puppets moving shadow-like against the back-curtain of my mind gradually assumed individuality – and more, a life of their own, quite

independent of me. They even changed their individuality against my will, so that one or two began became quite unlike the characters I had intended them to be. I was like a man driving an unwieldy team of horses who suddenly finds his passengers one by one standing beside him and helping with the reins.

During those five weeks I never once read over what I had written, which as a principle proved so satisfactory that it is one – almost the only one related to writing – from which I have not since seriously departed. In not one of the four other novels completed since then have I read through what I have written until the work was either finished or at least a month old. I occasionally have to look back to verify a fact, but for no other reason. You may say that this involves very good memory if nothing else in the case of a novel which may take four months to draft. But what if the heroine should contradict herself once or twice? This is a small price to pay in revision for the insurance that one's dreaded critical faculty should not get to work too soon and choke the life out of one's text.

In writing this way, with one's mind very active and no thought of immediate revision, all sorts of things come out and, once jotted down, are almost instantly forgotten. Some are rubbish, but others definitely good – and unexpected. When, nine months later – and never let it be said I have no restraint – I read over for the first time what I had written during those five exhausting weeks, I was, I must confess, quite impressed – sufficiently so, at least, to go on and complete the book.

The whole took two years. From this it will be gathered that very little of the original impulsive burst survived in the finished script. But the scene was now set, incidents worked out and, most importantly, the characters now lived and breathed as surely as you or I.

In case it should be of interest to trace the history of this first novel further, I may say that I sent it to one publishing house who returned it after four months but asked to see more of my work. Whilst encouraging, this was a request of doubtful value to a young man anxious to justify his existence on earth. However, I sent the book to another publishing house who kept it for seven months and then agreed to accept it. So much for *The House*.

In order to understand the genesis of my next two books it is necessary to go back a little way. With all my books except the second there have been three distinguishable stages in the actual production of the story: (1) Idea, (2) Plot and (3) Incidents. Seeds are always falling on my mind and it

depends on its condition which – if any – germinate. Where an idea comes from I usually will not know, but once it has taken root, developing the plot is mainly a matter of hard work and many of the minor incidents arise during the writing process. Only in one case, after five novels written, can I identify the source of an idea. This concerns *John Rowe*.

Shortly after completing *The House* a man came to live in our district. He was unusual; roused curiosity. Casual inquiry elicited his story: he had held an educational position in India. On his way home during the war he was torpedoed in the Channel and, after being picked up, spent more than a year in a Cornish hospital with complete loss of memory. His family had believed him dead, but he was traced by accident and now reunited with them. Although his memory had not returned, he was otherwise normal, though quiet and reserved.

Such a story is not unique in fiction, but the discovery that it could happen in fact gave me both an idea in not-quite-usual form and the courage to use it.

In light of my traumatising first-novel experience I resolved this time to do things differently. Everything was to be planned. There would be no haphazard, impulsive plunging into unknown depths. Each chapter would be worked out systematically, every character carefully realised before I made a start on drafting.

This over a period of three weeks I largely achieved but, when at last the time came to begin to write, I found the impulse to do so had evaporated. I felt no interest in the plot, incidents or characters. The effort of working everything out beforehand had consumed the original impulse entirely.

What to do? Though no believer in pandering too abjectly to one's inspiration, quite frankly I couldn't have started then whatever had depended on it. After a period of brooding, I abruptly had the idea for another story. This time, on a flood of reaction, I took a diametrically opposite tack. With this germ of an idea, few incidents worked out except the first ones and scarcely any plot, I decided to write coldly and systematically while allowing my characters all the play they needed. Considering everything, *Into the Fog*, my second published novel, didn't work out so badly. But we're concerned here principally with my third, *John Rowe*.

For thirteen months it lay neglected while *Fog* was completed. Then, after a brief holiday, I came back to it on a flood of reaction as strong as the one on which I had left it. Having finished *Into the Fog* and tired of that

style temporarily, I returned with real pleasure to the mood of my first novel – but with the big difference this time that the whole story was ready planned; worked out in every detail.

I set to and wrote it, beginning to end, 100,000 words in two months, and this time found the effort less exhausting. That, of course, didn't yield a finished book, which took another five months, but still, for me, seven months all told is easily a record – and there is no question that *John Rowe* was written more easily and with less conscious effort than any other of my novels.

The only reasons I have to offer for this are connected more with externals than with the actual writing: first, I was helped by the gratifying reception given to my first novel and, second, my publisher's expressed willingness to take two books a year was a spur. The only other explanation I can offer is that I think a condition of successful novel writing is that the author must have an affection for his characters and this was particularly so with me in respect of *John Rowe*.

You will see, so far as my own case is concerned, that the manner of writing has differed with each book attempted – the first was hot-blooded, the second almost as cold-blooded as the first was hot (though I am pretty sure it is not detectable in the finished article) and the third a mixture of each method, with an inclination towards the first. And what may we conclude from this? That the actual manner of writing depends as much as anything upon circumstances exterior to the novel – although the success or failure of a particular novel does not depend upon the manner of its writing at all.

Having made that much clear, let us turn now to consider the plot of *John Rowe*. I said that the evolution of a story could be divided into three main categories, the first two of which were the Idea, the source of which is usually quite untraceable, but in *John Rowe* happens to be marked, and the Plot which, once given the idea, is mainly – *mainly* – a matter of hard work. No doubt you will ask what exactly is meant by hard work? How does one tackle the challenge of nurturing a single seed into a complicated harvest?

By thinking. By exercising one's imagination, it goes without saying. Not uncontrolled imagination, though, but imagination in the close care of one's literary conscience. For example, my imagination might conceive of a woman falling into a river and being rescued by a complete stranger walking along the bank. One's literary conscience would pass this without

qualm. But imagination might conceive that the stranger should turn out to be the woman's brother from America whom she had not seen for twenty years and who had no idea of her presence in the vicinity. One's literary conscience would baulk at this; would in fact probably reject it because of the undue use of coincidence, even though such a thing could conceivably happen in life.

Very well, but sometimes – too often – it's all literary conscience and no imagination, particularly after potatoes for lunch. The mind, in a rut, throws out feeble suggestions which are pounced upon by a heavily sarcastic literary conscience and torn limb from limb. "Cheap and nasty!" "Melodrama!" "As old as what Mr Gladstone said!"

The only way of dealing with such trouble is to work the mind on paper; to put a question down and set yourself to answer it. Having done that, follow with another which arises from the first. This, frankly, is the only way to work one's mind efficiently, even when it is energetic. In a moment I'll give a detailed illustration of what I mean.

Of course, it involves a lot more fag. It is much harder work to reach a conclusion on the back of ten pages of scribble than doing so by majestic inspiration. But if you decide to do no more than wait for inspiration, nine times out of ten it won't come.

I don't want you to think I'm underestimating the value of inspiration, but the man who spoke of 2% inspiration and 98% perspiration wasn't far wrong so far as novel writing is concerned – nor, for that matter, so far as any other creative work is concerned, except, possibly, music – and even Beethoven spent months over revision.

But some proportion of that 2% is vitally necessary – indeed, indispensable – to any work. In my case it comes mainly in the conception of the idea – for which, you notice, I have no formula – then figures very little in working out the plot, only to re-emerge unexpectedly now and then in writing, in such a manner as to turn any dull day sunny.

It will probably occur to some of you who have read *John Rowe* to wonder whether I have been to Portugal, where the book's later chapters are set. The answer is no. This is not an unheard-of practice among authors – consider, for instance, the case of E. Arnot Robertson, whose 1931 tour de force *Four Frightened People* is one among many examples. [The book is set in Malaya, which Robertson never visited; rather, she researched her setting in the library of the British Museum.] As a matter of fact, people are always asking me if I have done some particular thing or been to a

particular place I have described. No doubt what they would really like to ask is whether I have been in all the situations I have pictured in my books, and that because they fail to disconnect the personality of the author from that of his characters.

The more I write, the more I become aware that successful novel writing depends not on the quantity of your experience but on the quality of your imagination (which does *not* mean that incidents closely related to one's own experience don't provide the best copy). But what you ought to be asking now is, *why* did I set *John Rowe's* closing scenes in Portugal? Was it arbitrarily, for no good reason, and, if so, why go to all the trouble – and it *was* a great deal of trouble – to get everything scrupulously accurate and convincing when it wasn't necessary?

In order to answer that question I'm going to read you a considerably abbreviated copy of some pages from the book in which I worked out *John Rowe's* plot. This will not merely explain why it was so arranged, but will give you as good an example as I possess of the manner in which plot problems are best resolved.

For the benefit of those who have not read the book, it concerns a dozen people taking a pleasure cruise on a private yacht. In the Bay of Biscay the vessel's owner, Sir Arnold Gresham, is murdered, after which the yacht puts into Lisbon, where the murderer eventually discloses himself. Joyce Gresham is the owner's daughter and Michael Stratton the First Officer.

The relationship between Joyce and Michael cannot be allowed to end inconclusively – yet that, it seems, is how it must do, for they have only known each other a few days and have quarrelled violently most of the time.

Q: What does their relationship need?

A: Some sort of violent impetus.

Q: What sort of impetus is desirable?

A: Possible danger to one or the other, forcing their relationship. (N.B. Danger to the girl is always more interesting although the least unusual. Additionally, as the murderer is in love with her, the danger cannot come through any attempt on his part on her life.)

Q: Suppose when the ship returns to England the murderer, feeling his own discovery to be imminent, attempts to kidnap her?

A: Disadvantage – melodramatic; advantage – would give just the right impetus if Michael Stratton were to save her.

Q: Can this be done convincingly?

A: Very much doubt it. The murderer could only kidnap her by taking her out of England again, and is it likely that in the law-abiding ports of this country – Falmouth, for example – he would chance at random upon a captain prepared to run such obvious risks of abetting him for money? Conclusion: it could be made possible but not, perhaps, entirely convincing. The alternatives are now to abandon this project in favour of another, or to make the yacht put into some foreign port instead of returning to England.

Q: What foreign port?

A: From their position, clearly a French or Portuguese one.

Q: What French port on that coast has a big foreign trade with tramp steamers of doubtful origin plying to all parts of the world?

A: None.

Q: What Portuguese?

A: Lisbon.

But with the owner murdered and questions of maritime law involved, the natural course of the owner's wife would be to order the yacht to return to England, even if it took a day longer. So,

Q: What could change her intention?

A: A breakdown of machinery.

Q: Would this be likely to happen on a new yacht?

A: Yes, although readers might not think so.

Q: What other alternative?

A: Damage through storm.

I hope it is now clear that Lisbon was not chosen haphazardly or empirically; also that the storm was not put in just to lend colour and excitement – though it was, of course, just right for doing exactly that.

The above process may strike you, at first hearing, as artificial and rather laboured; as logical but mechanical, but I don't think such objections are really valid, for it merely commits to paper what happens in everyone's mind every hour of every day. We all weigh up the pros and cons of a situation before reaching a decision. If I go out without a coat I may get wet, but if I take one it will be heavy and a nuisance to carry. Therefore I will take a mackintosh. The process I described is only taking the same simple logic a step further and putting it down on paper. It must happen in every author's head for him to be able to reason at all; I suggest that if he doesn't work his thoughts out on paper in this way it's either because the issues are too simple or his methods too slipshod.

Let us turn now to the question of characters. Do authors take characters wholesale from life in the manner they are widely supposed to? I should say in respect of minor characters, yes, but in respect of major ones, no. I am frequently asked whether my own characters are found in this way or are they, rather, always purely creatures of my imagination? Contradictory as it may seem, my answer is yes to both. I seldom take major characters straight from life to insert into a story for the simple reason that they will seldom fit. I intended to do so with the clergyman in *Into the Fog* but got cold feet and changed him at the last minute. What I do do a great deal is observe characteristics of people around me, which then frequently attach themselves, either spontaneously or by design, to some character on whom I am working.

The only *John Rowe* character modelled on a living person is Prof. Crabtree, who is as good a reproduction as I could manage of the head-master [Rev. A. F. Fryer] of my old school [[Longsight Grammar](#)]. But in that word *reproduction* I touch upon the fallacy of all portrayals from life.

It stands to reason that a character in a novel is convincing in proportion to the extent to which he comes to life and behaves naturally, and that must depend first upon the quality of the author's imagination and second upon the truth of the author's observation of the people around him. But to say that you have taken a living person and put him into

a book only means that you have taken the externals, the shell of some person you know and breathed into it the seed of your imagination whereby the character assumes individuality and a life of its own. But that that life and that character correspond in actual fact to the life and character of the person who has served as a model I don't believe the greatest insight can ensure.

I might perhaps conclude with some declaration of my policy – my general aim, shall we say. My first two novels, *The House with the Stained Glass Windows* and *Into The Fog*, were thrillers; my third and fourth, *The Riddle of John Rowe* and *Without Motive*, might be called mystery novels. The distinction, if it can be drawn, would be, I should say, that such crime as occurs in the latter two books results principally from the interaction of the characters one upon another; from them reacting to their circumstances rather than from any real criminal tendencies on the part of the characters themselves – in other words, it is crime as an expedient rather than crime as a profession.

My fifth novel, *The Dangerous Pawn*, which will be published next week, contains no murder and a mystery of only modest proportions. Whether that tendency away from the mystery novel and towards the straight novel is temporary or will become permanent is difficult as yet to say. But some of the reasons for it may be divined.

If plot-interest is the framework underpinning any story one may construct, then character-interest should be its bricks and mortar. Yet some mystery writers – of the type that specialises in a murder in chapter one followed by twenty-three chapters of police investigations – succeed in producing extraordinary structures as devoid of bricks and mortar as the Eiffel Tower.

Another obstacle in the way of the successful mystery novel is that in all except a few classical instances there must be at least one character who to a greater or lesser degree is unsatisfactory: the criminal himself. As a general rule, the bigger the surprise at the end, the less satisfactory as a complete character the criminal is. The more satisfactorily his character is drawn, the less should his eventual unmasking surprise.

Writers from very early days have come up against this difficulty. As a schoolboy, when I read Conan Doyle and [French author Émile] Gaboriau, I was puzzled and somewhat irritated by their habit of presenting a mystery in the first half of their novel and then harking back to long before its start to trace the criminal's history up to the moment of the crime. I did not

realise then that they were adopting this method with the sole idea of getting over this difficulty of making their criminal a more understandable creature.

Of course, in recent years there have been many attempts made to surmount this difficulty in other ways; most notable, perhaps, the fashion set or best exemplified by the classic murder story *Malice Aforethought*, in which the whole is seen from the murderer's angle. But that, admirable as it is, really evades the point at issue by ceasing to be a mystery story. It is just possible that eventually someone will hit on a formula for combining two methods such that the criminal is rendered wholly understandable whilst remaining masked until the end.

It's time I stopped now and you told me something for a change. I'll do my best – without promising – to answer any questions you care to put, but would like particularly to hear from those of you who have read *John Rowe*. What did you like about it and what dislike? I'm aware that I've only touched tonight on the fringe of a large subject which is contained in the title *The Novelist at Work*. The novelist at work finds all sorts of unexpected pleasures cropping up in the course of his job, and all sorts of unexpected trials. When I first thought of taking up writing seriously I tried to visualise all the possible trials which might come my way if I did so. But I certainly didn't contemplate the one which has come my way tonight.

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(ii) WG and public speaking

In a letter dated 29 April 1975, the Bodley Head's Euan Cameron advised WG that the Literary Editor of the *Birmingham Post* wanted him to give a talk to 700 guests on 5 June. "Although I seem to remember you said you didn't care for public speaking," he wrote, "it will mean a sale of fifty to one hundred [books] in one evening."¹ Whether or not WG accepted is not known, but for a man who professed not to care for public speaking, he seems to have done more than his share. In the 1930s, in addition to the three talks noted above, after performances of his first play, *Seven Suspected*, he addressed audiences in Perranporth in 1933,² Hayle in 1936³ and Bodmin⁴ and Ickenham⁵ in 1938. Similarly, after a performance of *New Moon* by Redruth Operatic Society on 10 April 1948, he thanked the company on behalf of all present for "a capital production, excellently

acted and quite beautifully sung".⁶ The previous month he had addressed the Plymouth and District Cornish Association on his Life and Work⁷ and the same October spoke to the Business and Professional Women's Club, Camborne on "The Making of a Film"⁸ – a talk he reprised four months later for Redruth Operatic Society,⁹ where, eight weeks on, he was back again to propose the toast at their annual dinner-dance.¹⁰ On 25 February 1954 and 21 July 1957 he returned to his pre-war theme of novel-writing (see pages 1-12) in addressing a Women's Unionist Club at St Austell¹¹ and a gathering of Assistant Librarians at Looe; the latter occasion was locally reported:¹²

In a thought-provoking talk on aspects of the novel and the craft of novel writing, he began by saying that the printed word was on the defensive against the insidious influence of more easily assimilated media. But the stronger influence was the urge of man to write, to give and leave proof of his existence in the printed word.

Quoting from Steinbeck, Maugham, Stevenson, Galsworthy and others, he said characters could either be allowed to grow and develop their own situations as a result of their own personality or could be evolved from a centrally conceived situation. The best method was probably a compromise between the two.

Mr. Graham said all characters should be drawn to some extent from life, but to bring them alive to the reader the author must feel them and experience their thoughts and emotions personally. The purpose of the novel was to entertain rather than to instruct, and to some degree all novels were an escape from one's own life and problems.

The present trend of novel writing, he suggested, fell into two main groups—the sentimentalists who made all their characters fundamentally decent and honest (the "cosy" school) and the inverted sentimentalists whose characters were all frustrated and bitter types (the "hate" school). The good novel should be neither one nor the other but a synthesis of both.

When WG opened an exhibition of Cornish books at Liskeard on 11 June 1951, a *Cornish Guardian* scribe was present:

Mr. Graham ... said that following post-war developments modern Cornish literature was in a more healthy and flourishing state than ever before.

"The reason is fairly simple. For the first time, so far as I have been able to discover, the vast majority of writing on Cornwall today is being done by people inside the county and that is surely an absolute essential. That is one essential of any healthy regional writing: it is indigenous and not alien," declared Mr. Graham.

He then made complimentary reference to a writer always dear to the hearts of Cornish people, the late Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch. Mr. Graham said the majority of Cornish writers today had their youth in the 1930s and in their own ways they all owed a great debt to one man: "Q".

There were now Cornish historians, Cornish poets, Cornish men and women writing biographies and Cornish novels, he went on.

"Between the wars there were rather too many novelists coming into the county, taking a cottage for a couple of months and writing a novel taking Cornwall's picturesque scenery and its quaint characters," he said.

This attitude might seem peculiar to people who knew that he himself, though not a Cornishman, wrote books on Cornwall. He thought, however, that an exception could be made of "genuine Cornish immigrants" who struggled against the advantages of true Cornish writers but who themselves had the advantage of being attached to the county and at the same time [were] able to take a detached view of it.

Mr. Graham finally congratulated ... Stuart Newman on his enterprise in arranging the exhibition in conjunction with the County Library whose officers had often given him (the speaker) invaluable help. He hoped that the exhibition would not be confined solely to Liskeard but that it would be seen elsewhere in the county.¹³

On the evening of 1 March 1956 at the Unionist Rooms, Lemon Street, Truro, WG addressed the monthly meeting of the Truro Townswomen's Guild, again speaking about his work. The following report ("Novelist Talks Of His Craft" – scribe unnamed) is from the *West Briton and Royal Cornwall Gazette* of 5 March 1956:

Sitting in a cinema at Falmouth and on a tombstone in a Cornish churchyard, Mr. Winston Graham had the first ideas for two of his novels, he disclosed in a talk to the Truro Townswomen's Guild on Thursday. He was telling members how he approached the task of writing a novel. He said that when the idea first came it was not good to go to work on it right away. It was best to allow it to sink to a "cellar" in the mind where it could remain and mature. Sometimes it might be years before the idea was drawn upon but, when it was, it would be all the better for its rest. It might come out in a different form but it would be essentially the same idea.

Different novelists produced their ideas in different ways and by different means. He knew of one who liked to walk around the room kicking the furniture and of another who could think better and thought out his best ideas at night.

ALL FROM LIFE

Mr. Graham said that he took all his characters from life, and the novelist who said that he did not do this was fooling himself. It was best to use characters whom the writer had only met once or twice, and not those whom he knew well. When he discovered an interesting character he should do the same thing as with the original idea – store it up and allow it to develop. When using the character, he had to be right inside it and to have something in common with it. It was no use writing about an avaricious person unless he was a bit of a miser himself, and it was no use writing about a witty person unless he, too, was a little humorous. Shakespeare was able to invent thousands of different characters from his own.

Mr. Graham's own famous character, Ross Poldark, came from an airman he met only once. It was during the war and the man had just been involved in a crash. Although he spoke to this man for a short while, the character created from that meeting filled four books [then – and more since].

The purpose of a novel was not principally to instruct, but to entertain. The old masters knew this, and told a story instead of searching into the minds of their characters in a form of psycho-analysis, as was the modern trend. Then, again, some novelists were far too literary. It was not necessary to be a good writer to be a novelist, and some novelists were far too guilty in the other extreme. They used offensive clichés, platitudes and adverbs when they could put the matter far more simply. The novelist was never quite free and never quite whole. He could never escape from his work for it was taken from life around him, and was never quite whole because he had to be two people – the observer and the partaker. He was the most harmless form of schizophrenic. In return, his book gave him something to turn to and was a warm relief from boredom.

INEVITABLE

When a book was finished there was one inevitable thing. The finished work would be disappointing to the writer for the achievement was always less than the dream. Only that day he had completed the twelfth chapter of a new novel [presumably Greek Fire] and had scrapped it all to start at Page 1 once more. He did not consider this a waste of time. He now knew that his characters were alive and in which direction the story was going. When he had written a novel, he re-wrote it, had it typed, pulled it to pieces and had it typed again.

The writing of a novel was a tremendous task, and financial rewards were small. If a man made £20,000 out of a novel, a considerable part of it was taken in income tax. But when

a man sat before his kitchen stove, filled in his football coupons and won the same amount, he was allowed to keep all of it.

When a book was written, it could be sent to an agent who would try to sell it to a publisher and, if he succeeded, he took ten per cent. The other way was to send it straight to a publishing firm. Many of these firms received about 2,000 unsolicited manuscripts a year, and out of these only about five or six were published. All manuscripts were read carefully and, if there was a spark of genius anywhere in the work, it was read several times. Only then was it either rejected or published. When the book was finished, proofs were sent to the author who checked up to see if there were any publishing errors. It was also read by a printer's reader who checked up to see if the novelist had made any errors. Then a copy of the book was sent to an artist who designed a jacket for it.

The first book would not sell very well almost certainly, and for that reason the publisher liked to see another manuscript so that they could be sure that their writer was not a one-book man. On his first book a writer might get ten per cent of the profits, going up to twenty per cent when he became established.

In a 1943 letter to Frank Swinnerton WG discloses that before the war he "used to do a bit of minor lecturing to WEA and Toc H groups" in Cornwall.¹⁴ On 3 February 1960 he spoke as guest of honour at the annual dinner of Perranporth's Chamber of Commerce:

[Mr. Graham] said that in three weeks time he and his family were leaving Perranporth, but it was most unlikely that Perranporth had seen the last of them.

He arrived in Perranporth as a teenager, he said, and he had grown up and matured and changed, just as Perranporth had grown up and matured and changed from a rather compact, closely integrated unit to the rather

sophisticated go-ahead little township it was today. And during his stay he had been so impressed by some of the people he had known that he had taken them as characters in some of his books.

In the past hundred years Perranporth had suffered two main desecrations.

One was the erection of chimneys everywhere, with land and hedges torn up and rubbish from the mines thrown about everywhere. Over the years, nature had gradually healed those scars.

Then in the twenties and thirties came the great building boom, when houses and bungalows of every sort and shape and colour were set down. The majority of those scars had been healed and even trees were being allowed to grow.

Perranporth today must be looking prettier than ever before in its history.

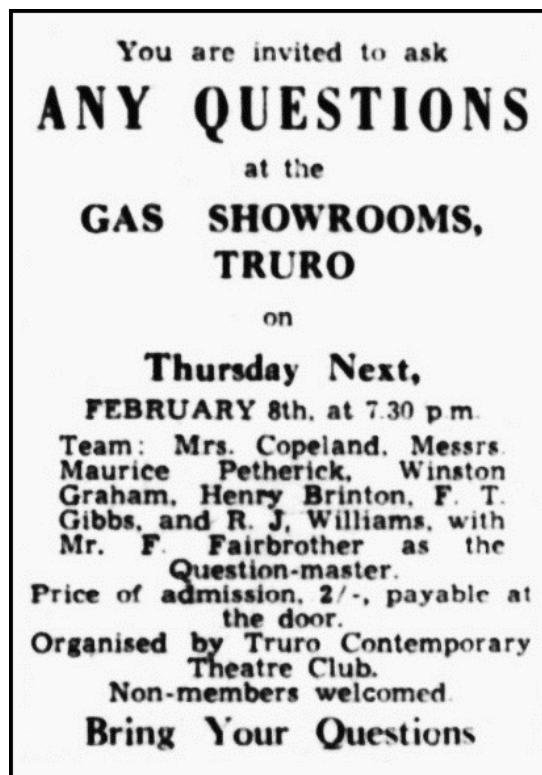
There was now another menace on the horizon – the caravan. It was right and good that people should have a holiday every year, but certain sanctions were necessary to prevent freedom becoming anarchic, and it was up to the people of Perranporth and of local authorities at least to limit the numbers.¹⁵

15 December 1951 found him opening a Christmas sale of more than fifty lots of autographed books, original paintings and crafts held at the Old Vicarage, St Ives (home of Denys Val Baker) "to enable *The Cornish Review* to continue publication".¹⁶ On 18 November 1955 WG and Jean were judges at the annual costume ball at St Petroc's Club, Bodmin, where they "found difficulty in choosing the prize-winners among the many glamorous and appropriate costumes".¹⁷ On 20 August 1952 at Rosemundy, St Agnes the couple accepted another ticklish brief in volunteering to select "Miss 1952" from a bevy of thirteen local carnival queens (with the winner, Miss P. Gilbert, from Perranporth).¹⁸

On 8 February 1951 Truro Contemporary Theatre Club organised an "Any Questions" evening at the town's Gas Showrooms, where one of the six panelists was WG. Below, paraphrased as necessary, are some questions and responses:

Q: Has nationalisation been a success?

WG: *Up to the present, nationalisation has been a failure. As for instituting a partnership with the people working in an industry, the best plan would be for the Government to have one-third, the people who had built up the industry to have one-third and the workers to have the other one-third. As things are, workers in nationalised industries merely feel they have exchanged one boss for another.*



Q: Do the team think the present younger generation is worse than its parents and do the team consider they are worse than their parents?

WG [emphatic]: *No!*

Q: What is the team's explanation of flying saucers?

WG [agreeing with Mr Williams]: *I also think it possible that experiments with guided missiles have something to do with it.*

Q: What characteristic in a woman makes the best wife?

WG: *Sympathy, charity and understanding.*

Mr Brinton: *The perfect wife is one who provides good food when you want it and, when she is not wanted, goes away.*

Q: What subjects are most important in the school curriculum?

WG [after two others had stressed the three Rs]: *I'd like to put in a plea for the teaching of ethics.*

Q: Will television tend to make people still more lazy in seeking entertainment?

Mr Petherick: *There is already a tendency for people to get their entertainment "out of a can" instead of making it for themselves.*

Mr Brinton: *It seems as if there are already too many media for putting across available drama, with the result that much of it is fourth and fifth rate.*

Mr Gibbs: *Television is the biggest tyrant ever introduced into the home.*

Mrs Copeland: *People should make more effort to make their own entertainment – for example, Truro's recent production of Bless the Bride is one of the finest amateur shows of its type I've ever seen.*

WG: *Bearing in mind some of the home musical evenings I had to suffer in my childhood, I think it a good thing that good music, drama, lectures and art should be brought to the public by TV, radio and cinema. That surely is to be preferred to a whiskered gentleman in a musty hall, pointing at weary lantern slides and saying, "That's where I was in*

1877." I'm all for television, and while temporarily it does tend to draw people irrespective of the programmes, selective viewing will no doubt come.¹⁹

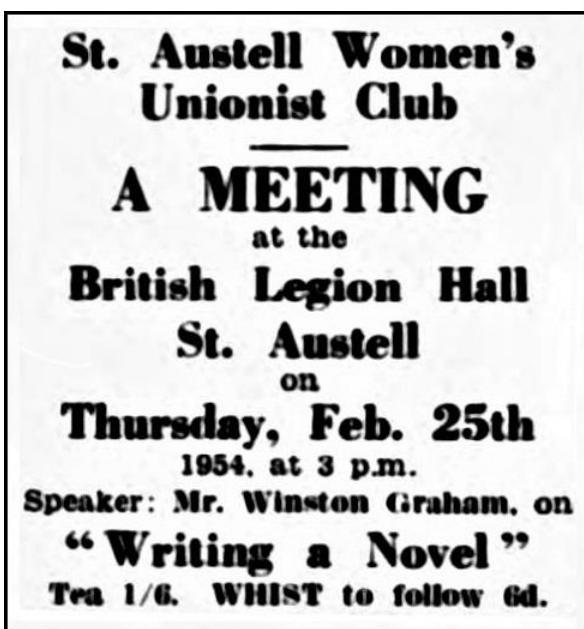
On 13 October 1952, WG attended a similar event, arranged this time by Truro Women's Institute. To the question "If you were given an unlimited amount of money to be used for the betterment of Truro, how would you spend it?" he replied:

I would build an Arts Centre to make Truro the cultural as well as the administrative hub of the county and spend the rest of my allocation on making sure that the best of Truro's architecture – and there are many excellent examples of eighteenth century building in Truro – is seen to best advantage and not hidden by newer, and architecturally inferior, development.²⁰

In December 1963 WG postponed a "pretty big operation" so as not to let down the *Yorkshire Post* at whose Literary Lunch in Bradford he had promised to speak.²¹ In May 1964 he addressed the National Book League in London on "Literary Fashions"²² and in June 1976 spoke at the Royal Institution of Cornwall on "The Craft of the Historical Novelist".²³ In 1967 he delivered a "fairly wide ranging" lecture to Washington's English-Speaking Union whilst touring the US to promote *The Walking Stick*²⁴ and on 25 April 1974 gave the Royal Society of Literature's Don Carlos Coloma Memorial Lecture, speaking on "The Novelist as a Human Being".²⁵ In July 1978 he diffidently accepted an invitation to be guest of honour at a 27 September PEN Club Night, where his presence was deemed "amiable"²⁶. On 20 November 1980 he addressed Perranporth Discussion Group on "Why read poetry?"²⁷ and, in the same year, was one of two principal speakers at the West Country Writers' Association conference in Exeter (the other Frank Delaney).²⁸ His subject on 16 October 1981 at St Michael Penkivel Church's annual recital was "How I wrote the Poldark novels and how they came to be televised" with extracts of the novels read by way of illustration and coffee afterwards at Tregothnan "by permission of Lord and Lady Falmouth".²⁹ On 13 February 1994 he took to the stage of London's Shaftesbury Theatre to draw the raffle at the second *Dear Ralph* Valentine Gala.³⁰

As Chairman of the Management Committee of the Society of Authors he organised dinners to celebrate the centenaries of Arnold Bennett³¹ and John Galsworthy, no doubt speaking on both occasions – indeed the draft of his **GALSWORTHY** speech is preserved in the RCM, Truro archive.³² Similarly, he organised Savile Club events, such as Eric Partridge's eightieth birthday luncheon³³ or a dinner celebrating the memory of Thomas Hardy³⁴ which must have involved him, as prime mover, closely. RCM holds a set of roughly-written prompt cards prepared for another Savile speech given sometime in the late nineties, perhaps to commemorate his own ninetieth birthday. No doubt numerous other similar occasions there and elsewhere will have passed unrecorded. Recalling his friend after WG's death in 2003, Robin Ellis wrote:

*He had an enviable talent for public speaking, able to keep an audience enthralled with his word-spinning and story-telling, his soft Mancunian tones tinged with a comic or ironic edge.*³⁵



Cornish Guardian, 18 Feb 1954

Also held in Truro is a 1951 draft of what appears to be a long and detailed address praising the work of Perranzabuloe Parish Council. Whether it was delivered and, if so, when, where and to whom, is not known. But what seems certain is that WG would not have been loathe to give it, protest as he might.

NOTES AND SOURCES

¹ The letter is one of around twenty-five in the University of Reading's Bodley Head archive

² *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, 1 June 1933

³ *Cornishman*, 2 April 1936

⁴ *Cornish Guardian*, 7 and 14 April 1938

⁵ *Uxbridge and West Drayton Gazette*, 18 November 1938

⁶ *Cornishman*, 15 April 1948

⁷ *Western Morning News*, 16 March 1948

⁸ *Cornishman*, 7 October 1948

⁹ *Cornishman*, 17 February 1949

¹⁰ *Cornishman*, 14 April 1949

¹¹ *Cornish Guardian*, 18 February 1954

¹² *Cornish Guardian*, 25 July 1957

¹³ *Cornish Guardian*, 14 June 1951

¹⁴ Letter dated 17 January 1942 (but actually written a year later) in the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville's Frank Swinnerton archive

¹⁵ *Cornish Guardian*, 11 February 1960; the dinner was held at the Hotel Bristol, Newquay – so not exactly supporting local business!

¹⁶ *Cornish Guardian*, 13 December 1951; *The Cornish Review* was edited and published by Baker (see [DVB](#)), from whose door the wolf never seemed to stray very far. Recalling the sale in *Family Circles* (Kimber, 1983) he wrote:

*The auction was declared open in a witty speech
by Winston Graham ... another like Daphne du
Maurier who impresses by his absolute lack of
show [and] inherent and attractive modesty.*

¹⁷ *Cornish Guardian*, 24 November 1955

¹⁸ *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, 21 August 1952

¹⁹ *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, 5 (advertisement) +
12 February 1951

²⁰ *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, 13 October 1952

²¹ Letter dated 16 December 1963; archived: as 14

²² *Times*, 27 May 1964

²³ "About two-thirds of the original Address" is reprinted in *The Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall, New Series, Volume VII, Part Four, 1977*

²⁴ *Memoirs of a Private Man*, Book Two, Chapter Nine, Macmillan, 2003

²⁵ The address is reprinted in full in *Essays by Divers Hands*, New Series, Volume XXXIX, ed. John Press, OUP 1977 (See NHB)



West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser, 21 May 1956

²⁶ Box 227.4 of the PEN archive held by the University of Texas at Austin's Harry Ransom Center

²⁷ *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser*, 24 November 1980

²⁸ *Poet Luck* by Bill Pickard, Radcliffe Press, 2007

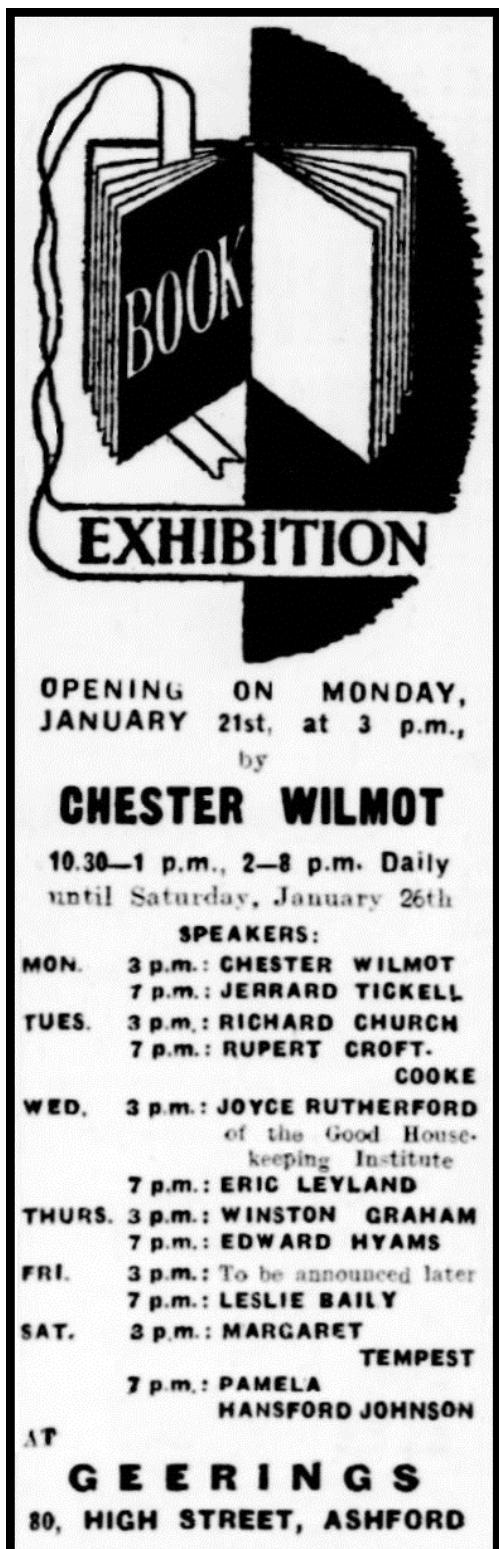
²⁹ *West Briton Argus*, 21 September 1981

³⁰ *Dear Ralph* 1994 Gala programme

³¹ Letter dated 20 August 1985 from WG to Irene Campbell; a copy is held in the Courtney Library of Truro's Royal Cornwall Museum

³² RCM, Truro, Notebook 8

³³ *Eric Partridge in his own words*, edited by David Crystal, Andre Deutsch, 1980



Yet another speaking engagement – and this time a long way from home (*Kentish Express*, 18 January 1952)

³⁴ "Hang Your Halo in the Hall!" *A History of the Savile Club* by Garrett Anderson, The Savile Club, 1993

³⁵ *Times*, 14 July 2003