

WG and A. L. Rowse

Alfred Leslie Rowse (1903-1997), historian, poet, biographer, diarist, critic and lecturer, was born in Tregonissey, Cornwall, to Dick Rowse, a china clay quarryman, and Annie Vaston. He attended St. Austell Grammar School then Christ Church College, Oxford, to which he won a scholarship and where in 1925 he gained a first class honours degree in History. After a distinguished career in academia, in 1973 he retired to Trenarren, his Cornish home, where he lived for the remainder of his life.

Rowse's first commercial full-length historical monograph, *Sir Richard Grenville of the Revenge*, appeared in 1937, after which *Tudor Cornwall* (1941) further strengthened his reputation. Between the 1950s and 1980s he produced a tremendous output of works on both history and Shakespeare; 65 of his 105 books were published after he was 65.

He was awarded an Honorary doctorate by the University of Exeter in 1960, elected to the Athenaeum in 1972, received the Benson Medal of the Royal Society of Literature in 1982 and was made a Companion of Honour in 1996, a year before his death. His *Times* obituarist wrote:

From the first to the last [he] was a cat that walked by itself. It will be a bad day for England and a worse one for historical scholarship when there are no more like him.¹

A complex, colourful and crusty character, Rowse "had an unshakeable belief in his own genius which might have been absurd ... were [it] not so formidable ... [Having] started with nothing, he ... saw no need to make concessions ever ... Geniuses, he said, are always difficult ..."2 A self-taught pianist ("in the end I gave it up for gardening")3 and twice-defeated Labour parliamentary candidate,4 he "had a freshness of mind that betokened his independence of spirit. This derived in large part ... from his background ... and, particularly, his Cornishness."5 A fellow of All Souls, Oxford at just 21, "some, including Dr Rowse himself, would say he was the greatest Cornishman of his generation."6 And

there was no hiding Rowse's annoyance at those who might try to affect Cornish credentials: to suggest intimate Cornish

connections when in fact there were none, or to threaten or usurp his position as the ultimate authority on things Cornish and on what it was to be Cornish:

We have had Daphne du Maurier's *Vanishing Cornwall*, Winston Graham's *Poldark's Cornwall* and eventually *Betjeman's Cornwall* [published in 1967, 1983 and 1984 respectively] – none of them Cornish, all of them having adopted Cornwall ... When is someone going to see that a 'Rowse's Cornwall'⁷ would be a different matter – history, antiquities, villages, crevices, holes and corners, relics, what is beneath: the *real* Cornwall.⁸



A. L. Rowse (1903-1997)

The bulk of Rowse's voluminous Papers are held by the University of Exeter and among them are eight letters and a postcard from Winston Graham. On the postcard WG sends thanks for the gift of a book of Rowse's poems; since the card is undated and its postmark illegible, no more need be said about it. The letters fall into two groups: the first, of three, written in the period 1963-4 and the second, of five, all dating from 1971. We can now consider these two groups, in context, one by one.

(1) 1963-4

After finishing *Marnie* in 1959, WG began the long and arduous task of researching and writing a novel – *The Grove of Eagles* – set in Elizabethan times, about the Killigrew family of Arwenack (now Falmouth), Cornwall. Since Rowse was both a Cornishman and a historian whose specialism was the Elizabethan era, it was inevitable that WG's work would come to his attention, a prospect about which its author was perhaps understandably nervous. But Hodder and Stoughton, the book's publisher, saw in this propinquity of interest not potential trouble ahead but, rather, an opportunity too choice to miss, for if Rowse's good opinion of the novel could be gained, it would be worth its weight in gold when it came to selling it. So, in 1963, without WG's knowledge, Hodder's deputy chairman John Attenborough sent Rowse a proof copy of *The Grove of Eagles* and asked for the historian's response. Though precisely what Rowse said is not known, the following two sentences – the first in particular recycled widely since – makes plain its strongly positive tenor:

*Winston Graham has such a knowledge of Elizabethan Cornwall, such fidelity to fact and atmosphere, that I am conquered, as no doubt his many readers will be. It is Kingsley brought up to date – but better, and truer in spirit to the age.*⁹

Attenborough then informed WG of what he'd done and how Rowse had responded, after which, on 7 September 1963, WG wrote the first of his eight letters to Rowse:

*If there was an opinion I feared in respect of this novel it was yours – not unnaturally! – so if there is an opinion I value more than any other it is also yours. I couldn't be more pleased that you like this book, or more grateful for the generous way in which you have expressed it ... I feel happier about this book now than at any time since the enterprise was begun.*¹⁰

Rowse must have responded to this with a suggestion that the two should meet, for on 4 April 1964 WG wrote again to confirm that such a prospect

would give him "very great pleasure" and suggested they try for the end of May, when he planned to be in Oxford to visit his son.

In a handwritten letter dated 18 December 1964, we learn why those plans fell through: because, following an operation, WG chose to recuperate not in Oxford but "abroad". But he expressed the hope that a meeting might still be arranged, perhaps when WG was next in Cornwall – a place, he says, that "has its claws firmly in me" such that "I don't quite regard anywhere else as home." Thereafter, more than six years of silence.

(2) 1971

The prelude to WG's second series of letters to Dr. Rowse concerns an academic spat in the pages of *The Times*. On 21 May 1971 the paper published a Rowse-penned article – **Guilt for the murder of Henry VI** – which laid the blame for the monarch's death squarely at the door of the future King Richard III. On 24 May, Jeremy Potter (author and Chairman of the Richard III Society) responded from the Garrick Club defending Richard's reputation and expressing dismay that Rowse should still be "propounding his anti-Richard theories as though they were facts". Two days later, Rowse declared portentously that "a don (i.e. *he*) should be willing to instruct when people don't know ... Mr. Potter will be glad to hear that [\[Rowse's own\]](#) *Bosworth Field and the Wars of the Roses* has just required a new edition ... When Mr. Potter has done his homework and read the book ... I shall be pleased to give him an hour's free public instruction at his Garrick Club – though I had not thought of that delightful club as a centre of historical study – or anywhere else he chooses."

On 28 May an uncowed Potter dismissed Rowse's "engaging but uninformative reply" and stuck affably but resolutely to his guns. This drew from Rowse a cogently-argued but even more disdainful eight-point letter, published on 5 June: "There is no difficulty about the sequence or sense of the events of 1483-5, as all historians of the period know ... the only difficulty is in getting across historical sense to those people who haven't got any, and *want* to believe what is contrary to the facts and common-sense."

On 8 June WG wrote from Falmouth:

Bravo for that splendid letter in the Times on Saturday! ... When I get "home" to Sussex I shall photostat the letter and send it to some of my friends who have been taken in by this fashionable fool.

Once again Rowse must have responded with an invitation to meet, this time to "talk about Richard", since on 17 June WG writes again:

I might take you up on that invitation ... For a long time I have had a particular interest in this period – the trouble is that too many people have walked this way before me where fiction is concerned.

Oddly, WG then writes a second letter on the same day, this time expressing effusive thanks for the gift he must just have opened of Rowse's book (mentioned in the *Times* correspondence above) *Bosworth Field*. This, WG states, was one of the few Rowse volumes he did not previously have, and had intended to get. His wish that the two men should meet is restated.

WG writes again on 21 August, by now having read the book "in a big greedy gulp". He discloses to Rowse that "one of the people to whom I sent a photostat of your TIMES letter replied that of course the facts were not in dispute, it was only the interpretation one put on them!" Beside these words, Rowse – a "venom[ous]" annotator¹¹ – has scrawled BF (i.e. "Bloody Fool"); but WG's next sentence earns a schoolmasterly tick:

I think the more one reads history – and also the longer one lives – the more one realises that a theory only has to be sufficiently improbable, with of course a touch of originality and romance about it, to attract legions of crack-pots who henceforward will defy the Holy Ghost in its defence.

It was always likely, sooner or later, that the cantankerous side of Rowse's nature would assert itself to deleterious affect and it's clear from WG's next, longest and last letter to Rowse, dated 8 November (and accompanied by a presentation copy of *The Japanese Girl*), that all is no longer well. Plainly Rowse has read a draft of *The Spanish Armadas* (which would

be published ten months later) and reported in typically forthright manner a "disgraceful mistake about the date and details of Raleigh's marriage ... a variety of [other] points [and] one or two pieces of sloppy writing". The historian has condescendingly advised WG to "read Michael Lewis", whose book was in fact one of the author's sources. WG also stands his ground – or "persists in iniquity" – and gives his reasons for doing so concerning other issues Rowse deigns "impossible" (the number of guns supplied to the Spanish by Sussex iron masters) or "shocking, unfair and untrue" (the Pope's incitement to murder Elizabeth). Neither will WG concede that his book does less than justice to Hawkins. Nonetheless, he signs off by thanking his correspondent for his "sharp and caustic criticisms" for which he is "very grateful".

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During an interview in March 1974, it was put to WG that: "You seem ... to have a great deal in common with [Rowse] in some ways. How would you have taken to perhaps going to a university and writing history and living in this way, cut off from the rest of the world?" He replied:

Well, I think it is marvellous for Rowse and it would be marvellous for me if I were primarily a historian but I'm primarily a novelist and I think it would be death for a novelist – at least, it would be death for me – not to be constantly renewing my impressions by going out and meeting people and seeing things and living a normal life and living at times perhaps a slightly abnormal life in order to find out how people work and live and tick.¹²

Yes, chalk and cheese indeed. To judge by the surviving correspondence, they never did meet.

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NOTES AND SOURCES

^{1, 6} *Writers in Cornwall*, Michael Williams, Tor Mark Books, 2010

^{2, 5, 11} James Fergusson, *The Independent*, 6 October 1997

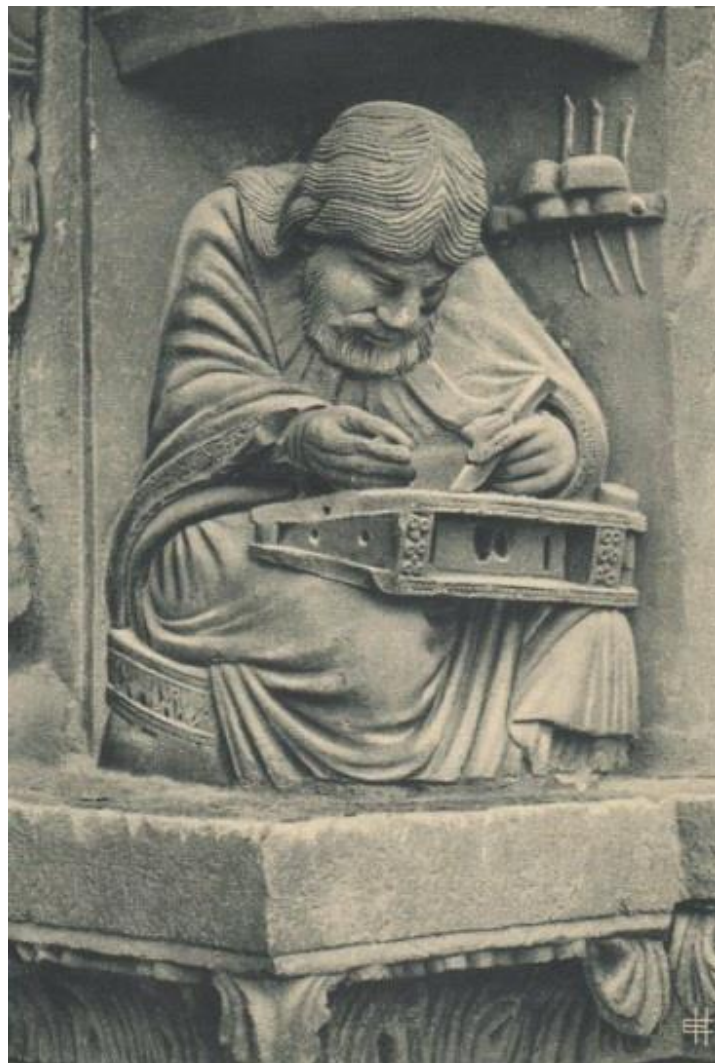
^{3,4} *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Radio 4, 15 August 1977

⁷ *A. L. Rowse's Cornwall* was published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson in 1988.

⁸ *A. L. Rowse and Cornwall: a Paradoxical Patriot*, Philip Payton, University of Exeter Press, 2005

⁹ *The Observer*, 8 December 1963 *et al.*

¹⁰ All letters excerpted here are held in the University of Exeter Special Collections Rowse Papers; correspondence; "G". Below, the postcard (image: Pythagoras, Chartres Cathedral); undated; posted in the UK.



¹² Videotaped interview recorded at Trerice Manor, Newquay on 27 March 1974, interviewer unknown; South West Film and Television Archive, Plymouth; database ID: 77477; tape number: AD2810