

WG and the Society of Authors

You've given a lot of time to the interests of your fellow writers ... (Roy Plomley to WG, 1977)¹

After a number of abortive attempts by authors to band together to provide mutual support, in September 1883 twelve fellow Savile Club members set up a working party as a result of which, on 18 February 1884, the first General Meeting of **the Society of Authors** took place. A Management Committee was elected with Walter Besant as Chair, a Council of eighteen members was appointed and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the Poet Laureate, became the first President. This simple but effective management structure has prevailed ever since:

The President, though an ambassador for the Society and free to comment on broad policy issues, plays no active role in direction or governance. Nine Presidents have succeeded Tennyson, namely: George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, James Barrie, John Masefield, A. P. Herbert, Veronica Wedgwood (retired), V. S. Pritchett, P. D. James (retired) and present incumbent (as of 2019) Philip Pullman.

The Council, which is headed by the President, is made up of "members of high standing ... who have been exceptional in their support of the Society"² and has two powers only: to elect the President and to ensure, in the event that the organisation should cease to exist, that any assets are passed to a similar body.

The Society's direction and governance are overseen by a **Management Committee**, comprising twelve elected members, each of whom serves a three-year term (with four being replaced each year on a rolling basis), led by a Chair, also elected, who serves a two-year term.

As of 2019, the Society's **membership** exceeds 10,000, comprising circa 9,500 *members* who enjoy full voting rights plus a few hundred *associate members* who may not vote.

The Society's aim was and remains to advise individual members on professional issues and to lobby for the interests of authors. Since its incep-

tion, the Society has been at the forefront of many successful campaigns for authors' rights, including the protection of copyright and (after a dour near-thirty-year struggle) the introduction of Public Lending Right. The Society administers a range of grants for writers in need and to fund work in progress, awarding more than a quarter of a million pounds each year. It also administers prizes for fiction, non-fiction, poetry, translation and drama. Important to its own financial wellbeing, it also acts as the literary representative for the estates of a number of writers including George Bernard Shaw, T. S. Eliot, Philip Larkin, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Robert Louis Stevenson, John Masefield, A. E. Housman and others.

The Society was launched as, and for more than ninety years remained, a non-profit-making limited company with shares held by members, but after changes in national legislation made trade union status compatible with its working practices, in 1978 the Society balloted its members who decided by more than a two-thirds majority (68.5% in favour; 31.5% against) that such status should be applied for; it was, successfully, such that, in 1978, the Society of Authors became a "special register body" i.e. both a company limited by a "nominal" shareholding and an officially-recognised Trade Union.³ Authors of all kinds are eligible to join, whether already established or at the beginning of their careers.

In March 2019, the Society completed its move into **24 Bedford Row, Bloomsbury, WC1**, the second property the organisation has owned, but the latest of several from which it has worked: before incorporation, the Society's Council met at 19 Garrick Street and its Committee of Management at 6 Queen Anne's Gate, Westminster. Its first official address was 24 Salisbury Street in the Strand. Over the next half-century it leased the following office premises:

1887-1901: 4 Portugal Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields

1901-1913: Storey's Gate, Westminster

1913-1925: Tothill Street, Westminster

1925-1939: 11 Gower Street, Bloomsbury

In 1939 the Society acquired and moved into 84 Drayton Gardens, SW10, which would remain its home for eighty years. But, increasingly outdated, inaccessible, in need of modernisation and unfit for purpose, the property

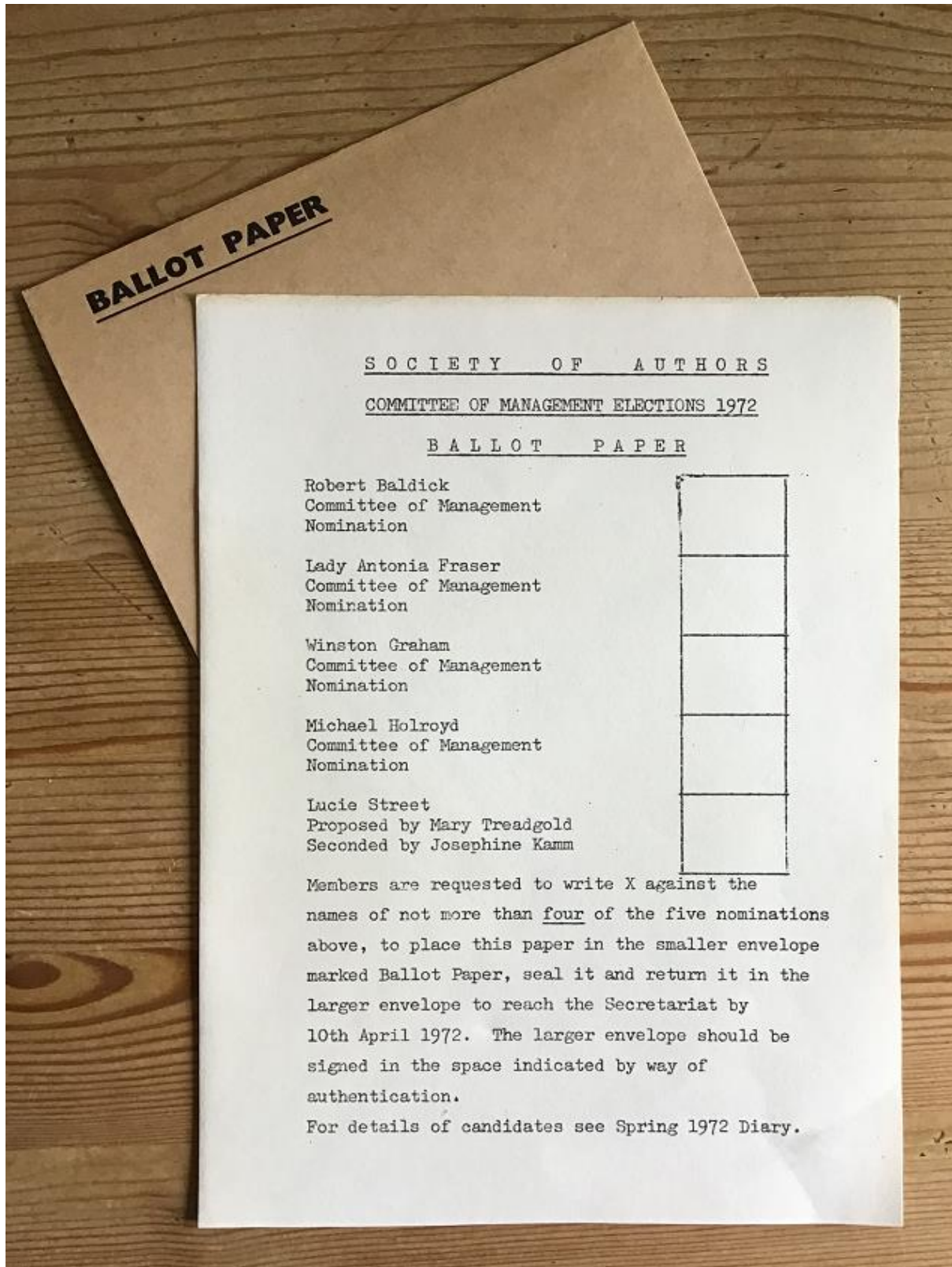
was finally sold in 2018 to fund the acquisition of 24 Bedford Row (see image below). Relocation there takes the Society back to within a few minutes' walk of its first office in Portugal Street.⁴



The first issue of the Society's quarterly journal, *The Author*, appeared in 1891. Its first editor, Walter Besant, was succeeded by George Herbert, Denys Kilham Roberts, C. R. Hewitt (writing as C. H. Rolph), Richard Findlater, Derek Parker, Andrew Taylor, Fanny Blake, Andrew Rosenheim and, since November 2012, James McConnachie.

Winston Graham joined the Society of Authors in 1945 and remained a member for the rest of his days. Consistent with the willingness he showed in other milieux (e.g. in Perranporth community life and at the Savile Club) to take active part and make a positive contribution, so too here – he was elected onto the Society's Committee of Management in 1955⁵ (whilst still living in Cornwall), 1962, 1966 and 1972, serving four terms – that's *twelve years* – in total, including one spell, from July 1967⁶ to July 1969, as Chairman. He became a Council member in 1955.

Though elections onto the Committee were usually uncontested (with the Committee itself nominating four candidates who would be returned unopposed) it was not always so. In 1972, a fifth candidate stood against the nominated four, which precipitated a ballot.



The ballot paper shown above was circulated to all voting members. WG came second, polling 419 votes, after Michael Holroyd (465) and ahead of Robert Baldick (414), Antonia Fraser (403) and Lucie Street (311). In the event, the result proved immaterial because shortly after the ballot Dr. Baldick passed away; the seat he vacated was offered to and accepted by Ms Street.

In his first year as Committee Chairman, WG took steps to stabilise the Society's finances by launching a Foundation Fund, to be maintained by donation and / or bequest. He announced the initiative in a three-page *Author* article which concluded:

*... If the Society is to be able to continue its unique services to British authors and their profession as developed in the past decade, provision must be made now not only for its immediate future but for its general stability. We believe that the Foundation Fund will do this. It is up to you.*⁷

Within three years the Fund had topped £10,000 and within six years had reached £25,000. It was also during WG's tenure as Chairman that the Society struck with the British Museum a deal of both financial and cultural significance:

One day last April [1969] a vanload of files, papers and tin boxes, culled out of basement cupboards and attics, left 84 Drayton Gardens for Bloomsbury. The Society's archives were on their way to the British Museum. This was the dénouement of a long process of preparation, conducted principally by three people: T. C. Skeat, Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum, John Carter of Sotheby & Co.⁸ and [author, farmer and publisher] Victor Bonham-Carter, who had been in charge of records at the Society for the past eight years.

The archive is of unique importance, for it relates to author-publisher relations and contingent matters over a period of some fifty years: i.e. from 1884, when the Society was founded by Walter Besant, until the 1930s. In a few cases the date has been extended so that the entire dossier

of correspondence up to an author's death can be included ... Copyright matters alone constitute a significant part of the collection, and since the Society acted for composers up to the Second World War, there is an important musical section. Many of the letters are characterised by a candour and forthrightness appropriate to a body whose function has lain somewhere between that of a lawyer and father confessor, in dealing with its unpredictable members.

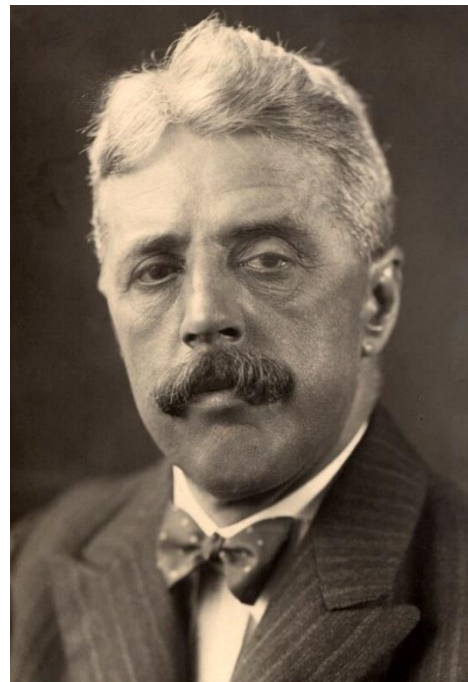
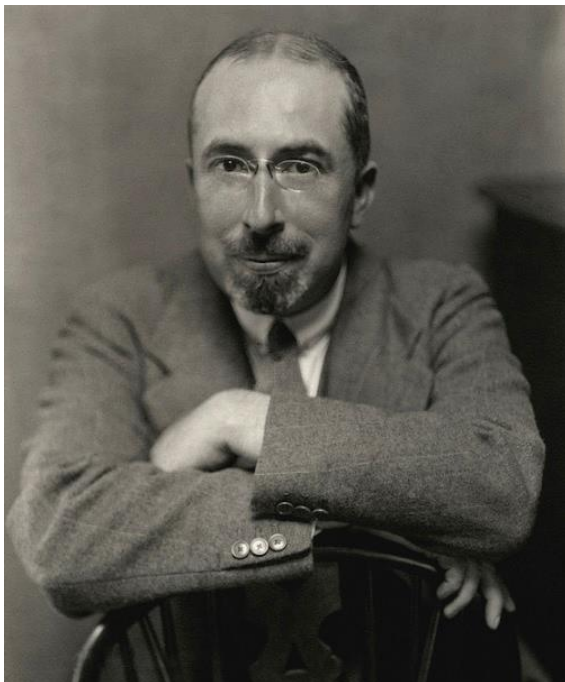
*The archive, in short, offers a mass of professional information, but also penetrates into the recesses of human nature ... There are at least 20 letters from Thomas Hardy; as many from Rider Haggard, upwards of 50 from E. W. Hornung; 100 from Maurice Hewlett, all autograph, mostly on policy matters (he was an active member of the Committee of Management); and 30 or so from Anthony Hope Hawkins, discussing the pricing of novels and copyright questions. William Heinemann wrote ... at least 50 letters about various aspects of publishing. There is the inside story of the suppression of *The Rainbow* in 1915 told in letters from D. H. Lawrence, his agent J. B. Pinker, Methuen's and the Society itself. Robert Ross discusses Lord Alfred Douglas's lawsuit over the copyright of [\[Oscar Wilde's\]](#) *De Profundis* in 1912. Sir Edward Marsh, from 10 Downing Street, relates his troubles with Mrs. Brooke over his memoir of Rupert. H. G. Wells figures extensively in the dispute with Vowles, his "troublesome collaborator", in discussions with Shaw and Kipling of a draft of a "Model Royalty Agreement", and as the injured party in the plagiarism case arising out of his *Outline of History* ...*

Sad as it was for the Society's Committee and staff to see the vans go and to part company with so much evidence of its illustrious past, they were relieved to shed responsibility for the physical preservation of these unique papers. There was also natural rejoicing that the £38,000 paid means a big stride towards the £100,000 target set for the Reserve Fund which the Society is determined to establish, and deep satisfaction that this significant part of our national literary heritage should be housed in the obvious

*national centre for such an archive – a place also where so many of the authors concerned spent a great part of their working lives.*⁹

In a letter to Irene Campbell dated 20 August 1985, WG recalls another notable Chairman's decision, this time concerning his old friend and fellow scribe Frank Swinnerton, who died in 1982 at the age of 98:

The last time I saw him (and it is sad it is so long ago) was in 1967 when I was Chairman of the Society of Authors and a dinner was arranged to commemorate the centenary of Arnold Bennett's birth. The Society was very reluctant indeed to invite anyone to speak who was not a member of the Society and never had been; but I said that unless F.S. was invited as the principal speaker I was not prepared to chair the dinner. [In his younger days, Swinnerton had come to know Bennett well, after first introducing himself by sending him one of his novels.]



[Frank Swinnerton \(1884-1982\) / Arnold Bennett \(1867-1931\)](#)

So he was invited, and of course made an excellent speech. In my introduction that night I said half jokingly that when it came time to celebrate the centenary of Frank Swinner-

ton's birth I looked forward with pleasure to his being there in person. By what a small margin was that splendid occasion missed!

In WG's day as Chairman, members would be welcomed into the Drayton Gardens Committee Room, by "a cynically grinning bust of Voltaire [and] a painting of Thackeray".¹⁰ (I wonder if they survived the move to Bedford Row?) In addition to his Chairman's reports, WG made a few other contributions to *The Author*, as, for instance, in these lines on the subject of "Anonymous reviewing":

In a closely integrated literary world such as exists in this country, where London is almost all, and where circles are relatively few and constantly overlapping, the problem of reviewing is not an easy one, since personality is to some extent always an intrusion upon judgment. In an ideal society it might be better if writers and reviewers never met; but they do, and they will go on doing so. In these circumstances I would not have thought the signed review has everything in its favour ...

*Clearly, neither anonymity nor the signed review is proof against crookedness, prejudice or personal malice; but there seems to me small enough evidence of these things. Most authors, I would have thought, get a reasonably fair deal; though if by any chance they happen to be in the forefront of the latest fashion their deal is likely to be fairer than others.*¹¹

Or here, writing about "The penalties of success":

Our three hazards

... Hazard (a) is ... keeping there. A steadily mounting income brings with it a steadily higher standard of living – or it does to any normal man who is not a miser. Yet ... there is no absolute certainty that next year's income will go up again. The only absolute certainty is that one's income tax will. Preserving a balance in spending between over-caution

and over-optimism is a delicate matter, as delicate as walking a tight-rope ...

Hazard (b) might be called Repetition. Be a particular success with a particular kind of novel, or establish a reputation for a particular kind of novel, and all sorts of subtle pressures build up to induce one to go on repeating. The public adore a "slot" writer; so do booksellers, so do publishers and agents – though the last two, as distinct from the first two, are usually tactful enough to let this be known only by inference.

*It isn't just money. Every writer who is honest with himself likes popularity and esteem. Now he has got it. Why risk it with a different type of book which may turn out anyway to be a terrible flop? Is it egoistic even to try? Think of the horrid example of Conan Doyle, writing his *White Company* and *Tragedy of Korosco* while the public cared only – and posterity was to care only – for those lightly tossed-off detective stories about a man called Holmes. But, even so, is it not one's duty to oneself to refuse to conform?*

Hazard (c) is concerned with disincentives. If one is lucky and persistently so, hazard (a) does begin to fade. Short of a major upheaval in public taste or some catastrophe of health, the thing looks as if it is going to go on. Then one works less constantly and less urgently – because the tax man is still around the corner, and why add to his pleasure and one's own burden? This far no harm. Leisure is a good thing. But how far will it go? Is it possible to strike a delicate balance here also, between full flow and attrition?

Writing to most people is horribly hard work. Not to all, of course ... But to most writers the effort of actually beginning to put words on paper is the most agonising effort in the world.

He will do anything, dictate letters, paw through books, even pay cheques, sooner than start. He will even, God help him, become a public figure if the opportunity arises. If he is an important writer this is a disaster. If he is just a successful one, perhaps it doesn't matter at all.¹²

The Author

Published by the Society of Authors
Vol. LXXVIII No. 2 Summer 1967

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One of several issues of *The Author* that includes a contribution from WG

Or in these thoughts about serialised books:

... I have never written a novel with an eye to serialisation – nor even with half an eye – though I don't know that it would necessarily be to the detriment if I had: for centuries the dramatist has accepted the convention of three curtains – and three curtain lines – without apparent damage to his integrity ... My own feeling is that serialisation does not greatly affect the sales of a book one way or the other, because it taps a different group of readers. Abridgement is the big snag. For all sorts of reasons the novel is more or less at the mercy of the sub-editor, who himself must conform to the top-level policy of the magazine. Sex may be toned down or eliminated, horrors smoothed over, this or that taboo observed ... All this ... would be more acceptable to the author if magazines would carry a caption "Adapted and abridged for serial use in Blank Magazine". So far, it is a point I have found editors will not or cannot concede, either in this country or abroad.¹³

Or when paying tribute, along with several others, to the memory of Elizabeth Barber OBE, who joined the Society's staff in 1936, retired in 1971 and died in 1979:

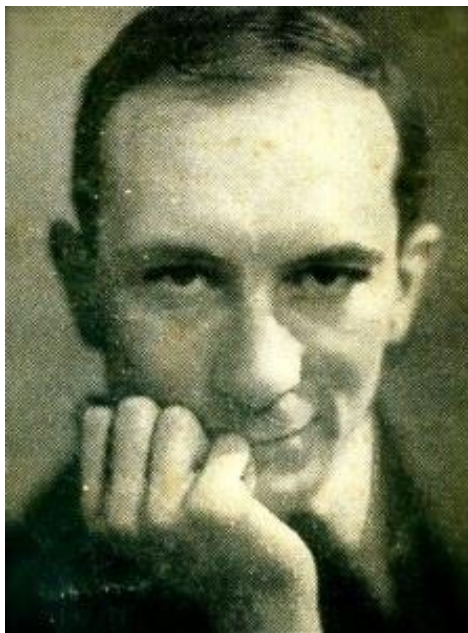
When Denys Kilham Roberts was secretary-general, Elizabeth Barber ... was often the steadying influence, the organiser, the "second man" on whom much of the day-to-day responsibility and a great deal of hard work fell ... [She] was completely feminine, and even when one saw her battling with someone on a difficult point ... one never lost appreciation of her charm and good looks.

She was very popular with the considerable staff who worked under her. She was popular with the various committees of management who worked with her. She was popular with the many authors for whom she worked so hard and long. And she was popular with publishers with whom at times it was necessary to be at variance. Her loyalty to her special friends was outstanding ...

It would be a mistake just to say she will be missed. She already has been missed, since 1971 when she retired from the world that was her pleasure and her life.¹⁴

In the journal's Summer 1984 Centenary Edition, he was one of two writers to contribute a piece headed Drayton Gardens Memories:

I joined the Society of Authors in the forties ... I was enjoying my first successes with books that were beginning to sell and a film script made into a successful feature film by Rank. I knew nothing of the Society, only that it was a good thing to belong. And I am sure I would have stayed a faithful but entirely non-active member had I not been elected to the Savile Club and shortly thereafter met Denys Kilham Roberts. For no obvious reason he seemed to take a liking to me (initially I was not much taken with him, though I revisited my opinion later) and presently he asked me if I would become a member of the Committee of Management.



Denys Kilham Roberts (1903-1976)

At the time Denys had slightly less influence over the Society than the Czar of all the Russias over his kulaks, but only slightly less. He achieved this by a mixture of charm, cajolery, manipulation and sheer talent. He was a man with

a strange saturnine countenance which reflected his wickedly sardonic sense of humour. One of the first times I met him he was with a group of friends at the Savile explaining why this or that English publisher wasn't any good, each one in turn being disqualified on financial, intellectual or moral grounds. Practically every publisher was mentioned. It was all good fun and not to be taken seriously. Or not too seriously.

Yet he was also a man with many small, thoughtful generousities which seldom came to public notice ...

I expected to find in *The Author* of Autumn or Winter 2003 some form of notice recording WG's demise together with an appreciation of the valuable contribution he made to the Society's management and financial fitness – but (unless I missed it) not a word. The self-styled "private man" might have approved; it seems to me shabby nonetheless.

Public Lending Right (PLR)

Whilst fulfilling an important social need, lending libraries also deprive authors of income. In recognition of this, PLR is a scheme allowing authors to be recompensed each time one of their books is loaned. In 1946 Denmark became the first country to implement a PLR scheme, with the rest of Scandinavia following in its wake. As of 2019, twenty-eight countries practise PLR in some guise – though France, for one, still does not. In the UK, legislation to enable PLR was passed only in 1979, and not implemented until 1982, and that only after almost three decades of tenacious lobbying by the Society of Authors and others. In this dour, divisive, sometimes bitter but ultimately successful campaign, WG played his part.

The first Briton to suggest the establishment of a lending right was author and librarian Eric Leyland, who proposed in 1951 that subscription libraries pay an author a halfpenny each time his book was lent. Later that year, in an open letter in the Summer edition of *The Author*, another writer, John Brophy, developed the idea by recommending that a fee of one penny – it came to be called "the Brophy penny" – be levied on each borrowing, with nine-tenths of the penny going to the author and the other tenth to the library to pay administration costs. This proposal drew from WG a letter to

the *Daily Telegraph*, which was published (seemingly his first in the national press) on 28 September 1951:

Mr Brophy's scheme of a [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.

After hopes that the *Copyright Act 1956* would address the issue were disappointed, on 6 June 1957 the *Times* fanned the flame with a leader headed *Earned Increment* which declared baldly:

There is something intrinsically absurd in the fact that a considerable proportion of the reading public takes its books from a library without thereby benefitting the writer in any way, once he has received the royalty on each single copy sold.

In 1959 Society members Sir Alan Herbert (a former MP) and J. Alan White initiated a major lobbying / action campaign. In July 1960, a bill introduced by Herbert intended to amend the 1956 Act had to be abandoned due to international copyright complications.¹⁵ In 1966, the Arts Council convened a twelve-man working party under the chairmanship of Cecil Day-Lewis to consider and report on the matter; representing the Society of Authors were Victor Bonham-Carter and Winston Graham. After the Library Association objected to the party's first (1967) report, a revised report was presented in 1970. Lord Eccles, the minister with responsibility for the arts,

rejected its proposals, and instead, appointed a new working party to study how the copyright law might be amended to accommodate a lending right – the very thing Herbert had proposed ten years earlier. WG was not on this second working party. Its report, delivered in 1972, was welcomed by the Society of Authors, not because it was perfect, but because it was at least something. However, a number of authors disagreed strongly with its major provisions, resulting in a schism and the formation of the Writers Action Group (WAG). Under the leadership of Brigid (daughter of John) Brophy and Maureen Duffy, WAG soon became PLR's most vocal and energetic advocate. After a proselytising piece by Bernard Levin in the *Times* of 29 March 1973, for the next six weeks matters were argued back and forth in that paper's letters column; on 27 April WG was moved to have his say:

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 ...

One of the means by which WAG sought to advance their cause was by infiltrating members onto the Society's management committee – i.e. to seek change from within as well as without. Accordingly, in the ballot held on 26 April 1973 to elect four committee members, WAG fielded four candidates to stand against the Society's four nominees. Despite an unfortunate counting error which led to an initial declaration of incorrect tallies, the ballot duly returned, fairly and correctly, 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 which recorded 679 more votes cast than could possibly have been submitted. This led to a starchy response, published on 16 May, from committee chairman Geoffrey Trease, to which WG and seven other committee members also appended their names:

[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 ...

In 1976 another bill was introduced into the House but had to be abandoned in the face of a filibuster; the following year, yet another fared no better. WG, as well he might, sounded pessimistic.

PLOMLEY: You helped the fight for authors to get a Public Lending Right which, alas, they still haven't got.

WG: Which, alas, they haven't got. No, I was with Alan Herbert when he first began this campaign and I stayed with it for a long time, but I've rather lost touch with it now. Alas, it seems to be stagnating. I think the only thing to do is to start chaining ourselves to the railings of 10, Downing Street.¹⁶

Yet, thanks to the unswerving resolve of so many campaigners through the years, by 1979 the Conservative and Labour parties were both committed to PLR, all effective resistance having melted away, and at long last the *Public Lending Right Act 1979* was passed into law. Incidentally, WAG's argument – that the scheme should be funded centrally by the taxpayer rather than being devolved to libraries (who, after paying PLR, would be left with less to spend on books) – prevailed.¹⁷

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NOTES AND SOURCES

^{1,16} *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Radio 4, 26 November 1977

^{2,3} www.societyofauthors.org/about/governance

⁴ www.societyofauthors.org/news

⁵ During the mid-fifties, *The Author* featured Profiles of new Committee members; WG's, in the Vol. LXVI, No. 4, Winter

1955 edition, is a typically canny mix of fact – "Three of his novels, *Cordelia*, *Demelza* and *Fortune is a Woman*, have been major Book Club choices in America" / "He is also a member of the British Screen and Television Writers Association" – and fiction: "He wrote his first novel when he was twenty-three [not what *Memoirs* says] and has averaged one a year since, except for a four-year gap during the war." [In fact the only year of the war in which he did not publish at least one novel was 1943.]

⁶ 1967 was a difficult year for WG. Just two months after becoming Management Committee Chairman, his wife Jean suffered an incapacitating stroke and it is to his credit that, despite such pressing domestic concerns, he chose, rather than resign his office (as he must surely have considered doing) to soldier gamely on.

⁷ *The Author*, Vol. LXXVIV, No. 1, Spring 1968

⁸ Mr. Carter's role was presumably to advise on valuation. It is probable that he and WG met in the mid-sixties whilst WG was researching *The Walking Stick*, his 1967 novel in which Whittington's, a fictional London auction house, is central to the plot, and it is interesting to speculate on whether the move to dispose of the Society's archives was initiated by one or other of them, either separately or in tandem.

⁹ *The Author*, Summer 1969; these lines, though unsigned, may well have been written by WG himself.

¹⁰ *The Author*, Vol. LXXX, No. 1, Spring 1969

¹¹ *The Author*, Vol. LXXVI, No. 2, Summer 1965

¹² *The Author*, Vol. LXXVIII, No. 2, Summer 1967; reprinted in slightly abridged form in Vol. XCIII, No. 1, Spring 1982.

¹³ *The Author*, Vol. LXIX, No. 1, Spring 1958

¹⁴ *The Author*, Vol. XC, No. 3, Autumn 1979

¹⁵ *The Author*, Vol. LXXXII, No.1, Spring 1971

¹⁷ Much PLR info and also some text from *Public Lending Right – A History of the Idea* by Thomas Stave, Head Documents Librarian, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon, USA, Spring 1981

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