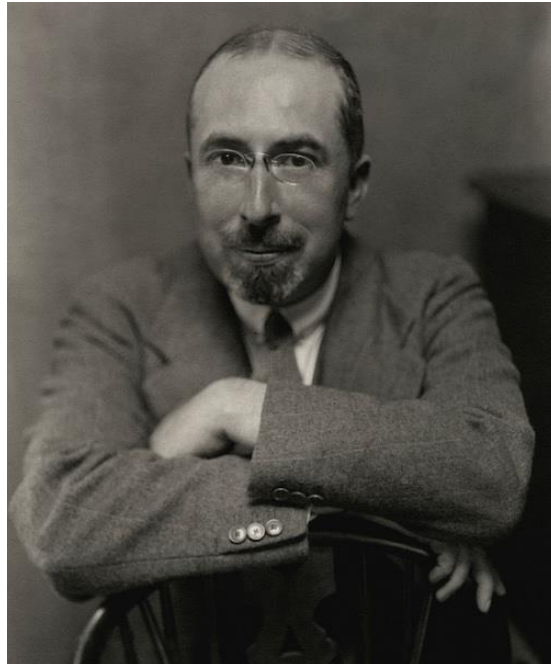


Dear Swinny : WG and Frank Swinnerton

At the age of 91, **Frank Swinnerton (1884-1982)** (image below) wrote of himself: "I have had a very long, happy life; happy domestically and rich in friendships, not only with fellow writers but with uncelebrated people."¹ One of those "fellow writers" was Winston Graham.



Swinnerton was a prolific author, President (1962-66) of the Royal Literary Fund and twice a castaway on BBC Radio Four's *Desert Island Discs* – the second time on his 90th birthday.² Here is his *Times* obituary:

Mr Frank Swinnerton, who died on November 6, at the age of 98, was a considerable figure in the literary life of the first half of this century not only because all his novels were readable (an achievement in itself) and the best of them likely to last, but because he was very much "in" publishing. His death also breaks one of the last links with his great contemporaries, Wells, Galsworthy and Arnold Bennett.

He began in 1901 as a clerk-receptionist at "a small desk, lighted by electricity and surrounded, like a cash-desk in a teashop, with glass windows". That was with J M Dent. Six years

later he was reading proofs with Chatto & Windus who soon promoted him to reading and advising on manuscripts submitted, including those of Aldous Huxley's *Limbo*, Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, and *The Journal of a Disappointed Man*. He also discovered Daisy Ashford's *The Young Visitors* for which he secured a preface by J M Barrie.

These and other much discussed publications of the 1920s gave the house of Chatto a great vogue and, even after he ceased to be their adviser (in 1926) in order to concentrate on his own writing, Swinnerton was a man who knew, often intimately, all the leading authors, editors, agents and publishers in London and many in New York and Boston. He thus acquired an incomparable knowledge, tempered and enriched by his own generous humour, of personalities and events in the publishing world which, fortunately, he drew on for his reminiscent and critical books, among them *A London Bookman* (1928), *The Georgian Literary Scene* (1935) and *Swinnerton : an Autobiography* (1937).

Frank Arthur Swinnerton was born on August 12, 1884, at Wood Green and, although he lived in the country for the latter half of his long life, it was only to rural Surrey that he withdrew. His ancestry was Midland English on his father's side, Scottish on his mother's, but he was wholly a Londoner and, like his master craftsmen forbears, claimed to be "altogether outside class".

His childhood was happy though unsettled – the family seems to have been constantly moving from one North London house to another – and marred by a serious illness the after effects of which caused him to be rejected for military service in the 1914-18 war. At one period the family fortunes sank so low that in telling of it he cited the "agonies of humiliation" and spoke of "walking the streets with empty pockets and an empty belly".

He left school at the age of 14 to work (very happily) as an office boy for six shillings a week. He completed his youthful education by reading, by his capacity for making friends (among them Philip Lee Warner and P. P. Howe, future publishers) and by listening to such lecturers as G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc and Bernard Shaw.

Meanwhile he was writing novels in his spare time: the fourth of these, *The Merry Heart* (1909) found a publisher when he was still only 23. For the following seven years he was a rising

young novelist, who read and reported other men's manuscripts (sometimes as many as 25 in a single week) for a livelihood. In 1917, however, he wrote, and published with Martin Secker, a short novel *Nocturne* which, after some early unfavourable notices, developed into first a critical and then a commercial success on the grand scale. Swinnerton regarded it as merely a *tour de force* as the idea of keeping the action within twenty four hours arose from another man's casual suggestion and, calling it "my albatross", maintained that *Nocturne* distracted critical attention from better novels he wrote before and after.

His style was natural and lucid, not apparently heavily wrought or loaded with subtleties of implication, and with this instrument, serviceable alike for narrative and for dialogue, he told excellent, credible stories about contemporary people, usually living in or near London, intelligent and aware of the times they were living in but concerned above all with their relationships as friends, enemies, lovers or rivals in love.

Such early novels as *The Casement* (1911), *On the Staircase* (1914), *September* (1919) and *Young Felix* (1923) have great charm and skill and can, incidentally, be taken as precise and truthful testimony to what people, and especially young people, were like, and what went on in their hearts and minds, during the first quarter of this century. The later novels tend to be longer and more dramatic, with *The Georgian House* (1932), *The Two Wives* (1939) and *A Woman of Sunshine* (1944) among the best.

Some saw the influence of Arnold Bennett as well as of Gissing in Swinnerton's fiction, but he himself was probably right when he maintained that the authors who most profoundly influenced him were three he read avidly in his youth – Henry James, Ibsen and Louisa M Alcott. This is an illuminating disclosure because much as these authors differ in kind all three are notable for their mastery of feminine psychology, and it is in such sensitive and perceptive insights, enabling him to create women characters persuasively and intimately real that Swinnerton the novelist excels.

He continued to publish novels and books of literary reminiscence into extreme old age. The latter displayed Swinnerton's knowledge of his period, his friendship and acquaintance with many of the most notable literary figures of his time and his own independence of thought and judgment. *Arnold Bennett: A Last Word* appeared as recently as 1978.

Swinnerton was of medium height and became somewhat stoutly built as he grew older, but until he was well over seventy his hair and his short, pointed beard kept their intense red colouring. His voice was rather high pitched but musical and he could use it mischievously in mimicry of other people, especially of his friends, H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, to illustrate one of his reminiscent anecdotes: he was as expert a story-teller in private life as in print. He was twice married, first in 1919, and then in 1924 to Mary Dorothy Bennett, by whom he had one child, a daughter, Olivia.³

And these lines are from *The New York Times*:

... Most of his books celebrate the literary life, love, human foibles and his neighbors outside the wooden gate of his home, Old Tokefield, a 16th-century stone cottage in Cranleigh, Surrey ... After years in London, [he had] made a deliberate decision to move to the country. He wanted to avoid what he called "society" and "the West End clique". In Surrey he found that he could work "without distraction, unwillingly [but] very hard." ... He also discovered as much material for his novels in a village as in London. "I take a constitutional in the morning after breakfast, saying hello to neighbors, stopping in at the greengrocer's, and some of them whisper their secrets to me," he said. "These are background for stories." ... He also went to the well of his experiences in the literary world. In devising a plot, he would "get my characters in a muddle," then extricate them. In the course of his novels, a gentle philosophy of living – his own – would frequently emerge. In his 1976 novel, *Some Achieve Greatness*, Mr. Swinnerton wrote: "The human mind, at first simple, gathers such complicated associations as the years pass that it becomes overcrowded. This is the reason why elderly men and women cannot immediately remember names. But I feel that old people should really be proud of their mental opulence."

Visitors to Old Tokefield were taken on a tour of the grounds and given a cup of tea and biscuits. The author's eyes telegraphed signals of pleasure; his humor – in person and in his books – was lighthearted and open but not cutting.

Visitors would also observe Mr. Swinnerton working among his flower beds and in his orchards. A path behind his cottage led to an orderly, workmanlike studio where [he] produced his immaculate manuscripts in a tiny script.

In addition to writing novels, Mr. Swinnerton was a literary critic, essayist, editor and journalist. "I should imagine my writing is dated," he said in 1976, "but I can't see how it could be otherwise." Having made his modest comment, he walked behind the cottage to his studio to get in a little more writing before supper.⁴

In September 1992, Irene Campbell submitted to the University of Warwick a PhD thesis entitled *FRANK SWINNERTON: THE LIFE AND WORKS OF A BOOK-MAN*. Of her subject she concluded:

*Swinnerton was not a great writer, but his temperament, circumstances and talent combined to produce a respected literary figure whose strength was his perception and understanding of the progress of the British literary world through the centuries.*⁵

Her study fleshes out the scant biographical details recorded above; the compelling picture that emerges is of a hardworking and well respected but self-deprecating author cum gardener; of a lover of cricket (Sussex in particular), music and the theatre; of a clubman, tennis player and family man, "light-hearted and open", self-made (his meagre early education disrupted by illness), given to writing longhand scripts in "an orderly, workmanlike studio", dedicated to the craft of literature in all its aspects and with an "ability to understand and sympathise with other people's beliefs and failings" – little wonder, then, that, despite their disparity in age, WG and Swinnerton found they were kindred spirits.

Though Swinnerton left Chatto & Windus "in 1926 ... to concentrate on his own writing", he kept in the literary swim (and, presumably, the wolf from the door) by continuing to moonlight as critic for the magazine *Truth*, the *London Evening News* (1929-32) and *The Observer* (1937-43) and it was this latter activity that particularly drew Swinnerton's name and work to WG's attention. Graham knew of the other's books, expressing in his introductory letter⁶ particular admiration for novels "*The Two Wives, Thankless Child, Harvest Comedy and The Georgian House* (in that order)"⁷ as well as the older

man's evocative 1935 critique *The Georgian Literary Scene*, which WG described as "a book on the art of writing more valuable than the vast majority of treatises recommended to the aspiring author" and "simply delightful". But what caused him, "a complete stranger", to set pen to paper was his "regret" at the other's retirement from "the post of reviewer to *The Observer*". WG went on:

Since you took over from Gerald Gould – and the time seems more than six years – I have read your reviews regularly with pleasure and advantage ... Your articles have always been read for themselves, especially for that little homily on some aspect of fiction writing which generally presaged the review proper.

For this and other reasons I have sometimes in the past thought of writing to thank you, but have been deterred by one very simple obstacle, that I write novels myself and have always felt that to send such a letter to a reviewer would be to lay oneself open to the suspicion of cupboard love. Anyway, that obstacle is now removed

I have not previously written to any author or critic whom I did not know. This occasion, by seeming to demand it, overcame both indolence and diffidence.⁸

Swinnerton took just six days to respond. WG's letter, which "gave (him) great pleasure", was, he concludes, "a good and kind deed". After explaining why he was leaving *The Observer* (overwork, a change of literary editor and a proposed 40% pay cut) and discussing aspects of those of his books that WG had mentioned, FS notes that "I don't remember ever to have seen one of your novels."⁹

Looking back in August 1985 at his long friendship with Swinnerton, who had then been dead for something under three years, WG recalled that, in response to that last remark:

... after a while, with the rashness of youth [albeit a "youth" in his mid-thirties], I sent him one. He wrote back a bit later,

*giving me a lengthy and all too generous criticism of the book (which I now think pretty poor) ...*¹⁰

The timeline and that last dismissive comment suggest between them that the book WG sent was probably *My Turn Next*, published in July 1942, since, by the time *The Merciless Ladies* was published in January 1944, the two men had already been corresponding for a year. Alternatively, of course, he may have sent both. In any event, by the time of the next FS letter to hand, dated 21 May 1946, the older man makes clear that he has read both *The Merciless Ladies* and December 1945's *Ross Poldark*. What's more, he is full of praise:

This book [RP] seems wholly to justify your belief in it. It is very good, very well written and both charming and powerful. It is a story which would have been easy to sentimentalize : you haven't sentimentalized it. On the contrary, you have kept it steadily moving, always sure and sincere, and full of human nature. The dialogue is good and unforced, the relations beautifully natural (more difficult than ever in a 'period' story), and the invention never otherwise than serenely confident. Some of the scenes in particular, e.g. that of Ross's first arrival at his old home and that in which Demelza goes out of doors after her first night with Ross, gave me particular pleasure. They are extraordinarily vivid. I felt less assurance over the Reuben scenes¹¹ and over the poaching episode, which are both a little conventional; but the scrap between Ross and Demelza's father is first-rate. I mustn't forget to say how excellent I thought your handling of a former age. That is difficult to keep in perspective, but you score complete success. Indeed, I could have done with more of it of the same quality. And this leads me to say of the book as a whole that it seems to show a real advance, not only in writing but in original perception of character (some of the perception particularly fine) on 'The Merciless Ladies'; and if you can write a modern story of the same calibre fairly soon I think there can be no doubt that you will fully establish your reputation. I hope 'Ross' did well and

*received proper treatment from the reviewers. I congratulate you on it as an achievement.*¹²

Less than a month later, FS writes again, this time in response to WG's news about being taken up by The Rank Organisation: "Film work has not only its financial rewards, great as these are : it will increase your contacts and broaden your approach to life and books, and is in fact a sign of important growth. Good luck in it."¹³

WG noted that the correspondence between the two men, though "sporadic (and) often at lengthy intervals ... lasted through the years and finally developed into an annual exchange of Christmas letters". In addition to matters related above, early exchanges discussed "the merits and demerits of various publishers (for few people knew them better than he)" as WG considered a change of stable. Though "chance took the decision more or less out of my hands", he wrote, still he "greatly appreciated the kindness and consideration which led [FS] to devote so much time and thought to the affairs of a casual pen friend."¹⁴

After three years of correspondence, the two men met for the first time in 1946 while WG was at Rank in London working on the production of *Take My Life*. Invited by FS to lunch at The Ivy in Covent Garden:

*I went along in some apprehensiveness at the thought of what I should say to the author of "The Georgian Literary Scene" ... I need not have worried about my conversational gifts; they were not needed. He talked wittily and entertainingly all through lunch, and, tipping the waiter ten shillings – a big sum in those days – he strode out, pausing only to exchange a pleasantry with [publisher] "Jamie" Hamilton on the way.*¹⁵

FS writes again on 26 July 1947, having just finished *Demelza*, and again offers fulsome praise:

I have now read 'Demelza' with great admiration and interest. Its 'architecture' is extraordinarily able; and the power of many

of the scenes is remarkable. So is the beauty of some of the others. The play of character and incident is quite outstanding. I won't say that I think it is a better book than 'Ross', because I doubt if there is anything to choose between them; but the loss of novelty in the second book – so much of its intrigue having already been foreshadowed in the first – suggests that as the interest is certainly equal, 'Demelza' is a particularly sustained effort. I never lost the essential curiosity in the people or their doings. So I congratulate you most warmly on doing such an admirable job.¹⁶

After a page and a half about other matters, FS then returns to the subject of WG's writing and shows, almost thirty years ahead of BBC1's *Poldark*, great prescience:

I hope your film work continues to give you the interest you found in it earlier. I thought some of the scenes in 'Demelza' would be magnificent material for development into such work and feel that you have a particularly strong sense of dramatic scenes and settings. Indeed, the wealth of such scenes – the gaol rescue, the riots, the gambling scenes and the wrecks, e.g. – in this book seems to suggest that you are a mine of material for drama of a kind which is both psychologically and scenically exciting.¹⁷

The last of the five available letters from FS to WG from this period is dated 22 December 1947 and returns to the topic of *Take My Life*, which had by then been on general release for seven months:

I must tell you that we [i.e. FS and his wife Mary] have been to see several films this Autumn, and that, when we saw that 'Take My Life' was at the Cranleigh cinema we made up our minds to go ... We enjoyed this film tremendously. We had just previously seen several which were more ambitious – e.g. 'Great Expectations' – and we agreed that there wasn't one of

*them that we had enjoyed so much as 'Take My Life'. It was very well acted; but the dexterity of it, and the incidental ingenuities, coupled with the suspense and dramatic power, belonged to the whole conception. I do not wonder that it got good notices. Since then my wife has read 'The Merciless Ladies' with absorbed attention; and now she is deep in 'Ross Poldark.' This is a real testimony, as she gets little time for reading, and is several books of mine behind.*¹⁸

By the late 1950s, a friendly Yuletide exchange of news and Christmas wishes was the norm. In 1959, in a letter dated "Christmas Day in the Morning", WG discloses that the Graham family's imminent departure from Cornwall has them in "great turmoil":

... now that we have burned our boats, the rational gets infused with the emotional, and I fear in my case the psychological, so that a mere uprooting operation takes on altogether too much importance.

This letter, by the way, starts with the salutation "Dear Swinny" and ends with a handwritten postscript plea that FS should not "in retaliation, I pray you, call me Winnie!"¹⁹

By the end of 1960, after a summer on the Riviera in a Cap Ferrat villa "about a mile from W.S.M." (i.e. W. Somerset Maugham), during which time he "did practically no work", WG was back once more in England. He reports having started on "what promises to be an impossibly long historical novel [i.e. *The Grove of Eagles*] ... For many years [American publisher] Doubledays have been hanging out lures and at last I have fallen."²⁰

On 14 December 1961 the disorganised state of his desk is on WG's mind:

It is a relief to hear of someone else who lives and continues to be creative in the midst of minor chaos: most of my friends seem to have such tidy habits.

He then reports the opinion of their common friend Edmond Segrave, editor of *The Bookseller* and seeming first coiner of "Swinny", that FS's latest novel "was by far the best you had written for years". WG then describes his new house, bought but not yet lived in, as "rather horrid" and the process of its renovation as "completely fascinating" but also "the most delightful way of going bankrupt."²¹

Two years on, by now settled into his new home, Abbotswood House, no longer "horrid" but "a Victorian-cum-Georgian mix-up (that) suits us very well", he praises FS's latest novel, *Figures in the Foreground*: "There's no one can write that type of book quite like you, or with the wisdom or the breadth of knowledge or the wit. I borrowed it to read but am getting it as a Christmas Present, so shall have leisure to read it again then."²²

Though the Grahams' late 1960 relocation to Sussex brought the two men geographically much closer, WG stated in 1985 that throughout their near forty year acquaintanceship, "actual meetings were quite few" – partly because for the first seventeen of those years one man lived in Surrey and the other in Cornwall and partly because Swinnerton's infrequent trips into London were usually taken up with engagements booked so far in advance that finding a mutually convenient date was not easy. But WG recalled a lunch he was able to stand his friend early in 1960. The Grahams were living at this time (just prior to their six month sojourn in the south of France) in a fourth floor flat in Harley Street. Concerned about the problem the stairs might pose his 75 year old friend:

My wife instructed me to bring him up slowly; there were chairs on each landing and he might well like to rest on the way. However, when he arrived he marched ahead of me up the stairs at a brisk pace talking all the time, and seemed not a bit out of breath when we got to the top. There he presented my wife with a bottle of Cointreau before tucking into a large and conversational lunch.

WG continues:

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. So he was invited, and of course made an excellent speech. [Note: in his younger days, Swinnerton had known Bennett well, having first introduced himself, somewhat like WG, by sending the older man one of his novels.]²³

In my introduction that night I said half jokingly that when it came time to celebrate the centenary of Frank Swinnerton's birth I looked forward with pleasure to his being there in person. By what a small margin was that splendid occasion missed!²⁴

The total number of letters the two men wrote to each other in forty years is not known. Just one a year each way would make eighty, but it seems that far fewer than that survive. Six from WG to FS are held by the University of Arkansas and, fortuitously, photocopies of five from FS to WG, all written in the mid-1940s have, together with WG's 1985 reminiscence, been preserved, though the originals, it would appear, have not. Additionally, some post-1964 letters from WG to FS may presently be in Texas.

The apparent loss of so much correspondence is regrettable. Nonetheless, the little which has survived gives a piquant flavour of the long and mutually satisfying camaraderie that first sprang up and then flourished between two of literature's unsung but most dedicated and loyal of servants, indicative of another virtue common to both: a precious talent for the making, cultivating, supporting and keeping of friends.

With special thanks for document provision to Dr Irene Campbell.

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NOTES AND SOURCES

¹ www.swinnerton.org/names

² The two episodes were broadcast on 19 June 1943 (leaving Swinnerton's name 29th on a guest-list that now stretches beyond three thousand) and 21 September 1974 – the latter some three years before WG's one and only appearance on 26 November 1977. Both men included Beethoven among their musical choices, though in their "luxury item" – exercise books and pens for WG, gin and vermouth for Swinnerton – revealed some difference in mindset too. Through the course of the programme's 75-year run, around 250 guests (including Roy Plomley himself) have been cast away at least twice, with comedian Arthur Askey (1900-1982) and Sir David Attenborough both invited to appear four times.

³ *The Times*, 10 November 1982

⁴ Herbert Mitgang, *The New York Times*, 10 November 1982 (excerpts only)

⁵ *FRANK SWINNERTON: THE LIFE AND WORKS OF A BOOKMAN* by Irene Campbell, The University of Warwick, 1992

⁶ The first letter from WG to FS is clearly dated "17th January 1942"; furthermore, towards its end WG gives his age as "thirty-three", which on 17 January 1942 he was. But Swinnerton quit *The Observer* in early January 1943; additionally, the novel *Thankless Child* referred to in the letter was not published until the second half of 1942 and in January of that year was not even completed (Swinnerton finished it on 19 April). The letter's date must therefore have been a New Year-related slip of the pen and its correct date **17 January 1943**. As for his age: well, WG was ever notoriously close about that, even, apparently, in personal letters.

⁷ Swinnerton novels from 1939, 1942, 1937 and 1932 respectively.

⁸ Letter, WG to FS, 17 January 1943 (see note 6 above)

⁹ Letter, FS to WG, 23 January 1943

¹⁰ Letter, WG to Irene Campbell, 20 August 1985

¹¹ When WG revised and considerably shortened the book before its American publication (as *The Renegade*) in 1951, the "Reuben" scenes were among those most severely cut.

¹² Letter, FS to WG, 21 May 1946

¹³ Letter, FS to WG, 15 June 1946

¹⁴ As 10

¹⁵ As 10

¹⁶ Letter, FS to WG, 26 July 1947

¹⁷ As 16

¹⁸ Letter, FS to WG, 22 December 1947

¹⁹ Letter, WG to FS, 25 December 1959

²⁰ Letter, WG to FS, 18 December 1960

²¹ Letter, WG to FS, 14 December 1961

²² Letter, WG to FS, 16 December 1963

²³ As 5

²⁴ As 10

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