

WG, Tom Attlee and the WEA

Tom Attlee (1880-1960) (below) was the elder brother of Britain's first postwar prime minister Clem. Born the sixth of eight children (Clem was the seventh; Tom his "favourite brother and mentor"¹) and raised in the London suburb of Putney, Attlee studied architecture at Oxford before returning to the East End to engage in social work. Though both Attlees were actively involved in educational projects, the Fabian Society and the early formation of the Independent Labour Party, with the outbreak of war in 1914 their paths diverged. Clem wished to serve, and did, with distinction in Gallipoli and Mesopotamia; Tom's Christian beliefs would not allow him to fight. Nor would he undertake non-combatant community service.²



[But] standing up as a conscientious objector was not a soft or cowardly option ... Sentenced [in February 1917] to three months imprisonment [Attlee was] sent to Wormwood Scrubs [where] for the first fortnight he faced a diet of bread and

water, sleeping on a plank with no mattress, for the first month in solitary confinement. Upon his release in May, he was sent briefly to barracks in Framley, Surrey, before facing another court-martial and a second term in jail: this time in Wandsworth [starting] with another ... month in solitary ... which did nothing for his health.³

He was released in March 1918 but soon sent back to Wandsworth once more, in conditions "slightly less severe than before, as inmates were by now beginning to send messages by Morse Code, and supporters sang hymns and songs outside the windows to cheer up the COs inside."⁴ Clem, meanwhile, had been invalided back from the front so that when the armistice was signed in 1918, Ellen Attlee, their mother, had two sons in Wandsworth: one in the military hospital, the other in prison. She is said to have remarked that she didn't know which ... she was more proud of.⁵

Tom's wife Kathleen suffered almost as much as her husband, if not more. She was from a military family – two of her uncles had been decorated in previous conflicts – and the stigma of being the wife of a "conchie" must have hit her hard, especially as, by the time of Tom's court-martial in 1917, she was the mother of a toddler and pregnant with the couple's second child.⁶ On Attlee's final release in April 1919, the family moved to Cornwall to settle near Falmouth and begin to heal the grievous wounds of recent years. Tom made no attempt to practise the architecture for which he was trained but, rather, sustained by his faith, took an active role in the education and support of the community in which he now lived.

Both of Attlee's sons joined the army in WWII, a decision their father accepted. "I think Tom's view was that Hitler made things different," his grandson said.⁷ Attlee, who, despite their differences, remained Clem's "life-long confidante"⁸, died in 1960: "One of the very few real saints ... Tom's moral courage and complete humility and selflessness were inspiring," wrote a correspondent to the bereft ex-PM.⁹

Amen to that.

WG relates in *Memoirs*¹⁰ that, immediately after his wedding to Jean on Monday 18 September 1939, the bride and groom went into Truro for tea with his "dearest friend, Fred Harris".



S. Bolitho and Fred Harris, Redruth, 1976

In 1928, after graduating from Oxford, where he read Modern History, then, at post-graduate level, Geography and Economic History, educationalist, historian, County Councillor and writer **F. L. Harris (1905-1998)** returned to his native Cornwall to take up a position (see below) with the WEA. In 1936 the University College of the South-West (which in 1955 became the University of Exeter) appointed him their University Resident Tutor for Cornwall, then, after the war, when staff numbers swelled, Senior Resident Tutor.¹¹ A 1951 Ministry of Education report observed that:

*A remarkable trait of adult education in Cornwall is the unity which informs it. Equally unmistakable is the very high standard of work. Many hands have no doubt played some part in bringing about these two happy results but by far the largest share has been that of one man, the senior resident tutor, who has worked in Cornwall for over twenty years. To him essentially must be ascribed the achievement of today.*¹²

Fred remained on faculty until 1969, while continuing his WEA work as "local branches were neither sufficiently strong nor established to challenge professional leadership".¹³

*The **Workers' Educational Association** had been founded in 1904 as an offshoot of the University Extension movement. Its primary aim was to encourage working class students to cooperate in their own education but, as it developed, it offered the opportunity for many people who had had the benefit of an academic training to share their experience with working people. The meeting of minds could then apply knowledge and thought, past and present, to current problems and future hopes. This was to be achieved, not merely by offering lectures, but by the tutorial class, in which members of a limited group were expected to take an active part in discussion and produce regular written work. These activities also acted as a ladder of opportunity for those who had little previous education, and so helped to bridge the class gap.*

The association grew rapidly and by 1914 had 170 branches ... and 11,430 individual members, mainly in the cities. Its early supporters were largely trade unionists and members of the cooperative and socialist movements, and at first its subjects of study were chiefly economics and industrial history, though, in response to demand, further topics were soon added.

The first WEA Branch in Cornwall was set up in Truro in November 1918, when post-war enthusiasm was at its height. In 1919 the South Western District, covering Devon and Cornwall, was established, with its secretary based in Plymouth. Unfortunately, the economic collapse of 1920 and 1921, which brought unemployment all over the country and was particularly bad in Cornwall, made progress in the early twenties very slow. Money was simply not available for providing courses; nor could students afford to pay for them. Then some help arrived. The Higher Education Committee of

the Cornwall County Council agreed to form a Joint Committee with the WEA and provide a small grant for its work. In 1928, with the extra help of a grant from the Carnegie Trust, the first part-time tutor-organiser was employed.

In the autumn of 1927, Tom [Attlee] had been invited to lecture on architecture at the Adult School which met on Sunday mornings in Truro. Soon after this he was asked to send a possible syllabus to the WEA. He looked out his old lecture notes from before the war and put forward The History of Buildings and other topics in that series. Then, remembering his Oxford days, he also declared his willingness to speak on general history and, even closer to his heart, literature. His offers were soon taken up, for Cornwall was not well supplied with potential and willing lecturers. In October he started a course of twelve lectures on Architecture in Redruth and another on Industrial History in Falmouth.

The new tutor-organiser, F. L. Harris, who took up his post in 1928, was delighted to find such a willing colleague. Fred Harris, son of a signalman (later station master) from Tywardreath, had just come down from Oxford and was full of enthusiasm for extending adult education in his own county. The chief obstacle was lack of finance, but he also badly needed support and advice, and found in Tom a ready listener and counsellor. Harris was conscious of the gap in age and background: 'he always called me Harris and I called him Mr Attlee' he says; and he used to recount, teasingly, that Tom had been known to say to a group of villagers: 'As you know, when you turn off the Champs Elysées ...' (Tom was also known to say casually, when taken with an impish desire to shock, 'When I was in Wormwood Scrubs ...') But Harris knew that Tom was a very popular speaker, who was able to transmit his experiences and his love of buildings, history and literature to whatever students came to hear him.¹⁴

In the pre-war thirties, one of those was **Winston Graham**:

In 1937, Graham was secretary of a WEA class in Perranporth to which Tom was lecturing. The aspiring novelist was very ready to ask for advice from his tutor and over the next twenty years regularly brought his manuscripts for criticism or encouragement. Tom was generous, particularly with the latter¹⁵, and strongly urged Graham to continue with the historical books. Tom was himself quite enraptured with the heroine, Demelza, as were the television audiences who saw the adaptation of the novels in the seventies. On the books set in other, mainly modern, periods, Tom offered suggestions, sometimes on style, with reference to his favourite nineteenth century authors, Meredith or Browning, sometimes correcting factual errors from his architectural experience. He was always tentative in making criticism, ready to blame his own obtuseness, and on one occasion had simply to admit his inability to judge. He wrote [ref Cordelia]: 'I have no doubt the Music Hall was like that; I never entered such a place. I would as soon have thought of attending a chapel.' Such were the limits of his experience.¹⁶

WG often visited Leory Croft, home of Tom and Kathleen Attlee and was "intrigued by what [he] found there".

Many years later, one of Tom's granddaughters, living in Australia, happened to pick up a book by Graham called The Merciless Ladies. Among the minor characters she suddenly recognised her grandparents:

The most noticeable characteristics of Dr Lynn were his height, his long jaw and his disreputable appearance ... When he had occasion to go walking on the road he was frequently mistaken for a tramp ... He had a certain amount of hair in

those days, though even then most of it grew round his ears. His eyes were very keen and small and grey, his mouth wide with the lips narrow and clever, his voice deep and rather low, and he had a cultured accent which went oddly with his clothes.

The most striking characteristics of Mrs Lynn were her height, her long jaw and her disreputable appearance. Husband and wife were, in fact, sometimes taken for brother and sister. But Mrs Lynn was proportionately taller for a woman, and her untidiness in a woman was more noticeable. She had blue eyes, of a startling vivid blue, wispy fair hair and a very high colour. Her voice was high-pitched and less attractive than her husband's. To see these two strange long-legged creatures gardening together like angular scarecrows, and conversing in English as it should be but seldom is spoken, was a study in the incongruous I was then too young to appreciate.

The story had opened with a visit by a schoolboy to this family, and went on to mention other recognisable features of the Attlee household: the lack of domestic help, the piles of books, the cobwebs, the cracked crockery, the candle stumps and even that "the house was lit by gas produced from a private plant in an outhouse, which Dr Lynn tried to keep in order." Mrs Lynn, it was said, took a few special pupils in advanced Greek. Of course, the development of the story was not true to the lives of the Attlees, but there is no denying the origin of some elements of the setting.¹⁷

Though WG, by his own admission, seldom drew characters straight from life,¹⁸ Tom and Kathleen Attlee must have seemed to him heaven-sent, ready

minted, to be taken down, unimprovable, as is. Just as he greedily absorbed all the characteristics of the "Ross" he met on a train in 1940,¹⁹ so too these Attlees. "Kathleen," writes her daughter-in-law,

*had occasional bouts of ill-health, including trouble with her legs, but seldom missed her daily bathe. For a long time this was in the creek; only in her later years was she content with a dip in a bathtub fixed at the bottom of the cliff, which filled with fresh seawater at every high tide.*²⁰

How could any author worth his salt pass up such material? WG dedicated *The Giant's Chair*, published in February 1938 (thus probably the first book his mentor helped him with) to "T. S. A." (i.e. Thomas Simons Attlee) and *The Four Swans* (May 1976) to husband and wife Fred and Gladys Harris (with Gladys having died the previous October). In the Ward Lock (1950) edition of *Jeremy Poldark* he specifically thanks both men (along with a third, J. N. Rosewarne) for "their advice and encouragement in this work from the beginning."

The picture that emerges is of an enterprising young chap not afraid to identify, pursue and cultivate useful contacts and rope in advisors²¹ to assist him in his life's work; also, one who strikes up and takes care to maintain lasting friendships; also one who, despite a bare minimum of formal education, shows a creditable willingness to accept responsibility (author, at 26, in response to a challenge, of a first and successful stage play²²; secretary of his WEA class, active in Toc H²³ etc). It is interesting to speculate on what Tom and his wife made of *The Merciless Ladies* – or, come to that, what the former conscientious objector made of the three contemporary novels (*No Exit*, *Night Journey* and *My Turn Next*) WG wrote that take place, in part or in whole, during WWII.²⁴

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NOTES AND SOURCES

¹ *Attlee* by Kenneth Harris, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982

² Paul Donovan, *Morning Star* online, 14 May 2014

³ *Subversive Peacemakers : War Resistance 1914-1918 : An Anglican Perspective* by Clive Barrett, The Lutterworth Press, 2014

⁴ As 3

⁵ Joanne Moorhead, *The Guardian*, 25 April 2014

⁶ As 5

⁷ As 5

⁸ *Citizen Clem – A Biography of Attlee* by John Bew, Quercus, 2016

⁹ As 1

¹⁰ Book One, Chapter Five of *Memoirs of a Private Man*, Macmillan, 2003

¹¹ 'The Gentle Path' : Fred Harris, 1905-1998 by F. R. Rayner, *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, New Series II, Volume III, Part 1, 1998

¹² *A survey of liberal adult education in Cornwall 1948-51*, The National Archives, Kew; reference ED 149/11/2

¹³ *Back to the land? Service and self-interest in adult education in rural England 1920-1945*: a paper by the University of Exeter's Bernard Deacon and Lynne Thompson, presented at the 29th Annual Conference of SCUTREA (Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults), 5-7 July 1999 at the University of Warwick

¹⁴ *With A Quiet Conscience – A Biography of Thomas Simons Attlee* by Peggy Attlee, Dove & Chough Press, 1995

¹⁵ The Graham Archive in the Courtney Library of Truro's Royal Cornwall Museum holds a number of long, detailed, closely written letters from Attlee to WG covering the period 1938 (*Keys Of Chance*) to 1954, though, judging by its dedication, he is likely to have helped (perhaps less formally) with *The Giant's Chair* also.

¹⁶ As 14

¹⁷ As 14

¹⁸ *The Craft Of The Historical Novelist*, The Journal Of The Royal Institution Of Cornwall, New Series, Vol. VII, Part 4, 1977

¹⁹ *Poldark's Cornwall*, The Bodley Head + Webb & Bower Ltd, 1983

²⁰ As 14

²¹ Tom Attlee and Fred Harris were among the first of a longish line that also includes, to name but a few, ophthalmologist A. Gerard East who provided medical background for *Night Without Stars*, Truro Infirmary pathologist Dr Denis Hocking who advised for *The Sleeping Partner* on the processes of tissue decay in a corpse, boxing promoter Mike Barrett who assisted with the milieu of *Angell, Pearl and Little God* and cosmetics executive Desmond Brand whose advice and experience helped inform *The Green Flash*.

²² *Seven Suspected* (circa 1934)

²³ In *Memoirs*, 1.4, WG mentions in passing that he had "over the years become involved in Toc H". Founded in 1915, Toc H is an international Christian outreach movement providing support for armed forces and other personnel, regardless of rank, class or faith, with a focus on Friendship, Service, Fairmindedness and The Kingdom of God. Toc H members seek to ease the burdens of others through acts of service. They also promote reconciliation and work to bring disparate sections of society together. Branches may organise localised activities such as hospital visits, entertainment for care home residents and residential holidays for special groups. WG's record of engagement with his local community – church, Toc H, tennis, Am Dram, WEA – is commendable. His outgoing nature (not always what one associates with an author) must surely have greatly benefitted his professional development. He drew, he told Arthur Pottersman in 1967, from "*everything*" – only useful, of course, when, by dint of exposing oneself to a wide variety of life experiences, the "*everything*" adds up to more than a bagatelle.

²⁴ The RIC archive holds nine letters written by Attlee to WG in the period 1938-1954, as follows:

- (1) Ref *Keys Of Chance*, two pages, undated (c1938): "My interest was held without faltering to the end."
- (2) Ref *Demelza*, two pages, dated 27 July 1946.
- (3) Ref *Cordelia*, two pages, dated 24 February 1948: "I have just finished *Cordelia* and found it absorbing."
- (4) In response to two letters from WG about *Cordelia*, two pages, dated 9 March 1948.
- (5) Ref *Night Without Stars*, two foolscap pages, undated: "I see a four-fold purpose to the book: (1) an exciting mystery gradually unfolded with hazard and adventure. (2) Delineation of the state of mind of the French as a result of the war and the occupation. (3) Study of the attitude to life of two people – Giles and Alix – who have suffered grievously. (4) Love story of these two people ..."
- (6) Ref *Jeremy Poldark*, two pages, undated.
- (7) Ref *Fortune Is A Woman*, two foolscap pages, undated (a detailed and not altogether favourable assessment).
- (8) Ref *Warleggan*, two foolscap pages, undated.
- (9) Ref *The Little Walls*, four pages, dated 11 March 1954. It would be fair to say that Attlee considered the book significantly flawed.

Thus none through the war years 1939-45 and none about any of the books, including *The Merciless Ladies*, written during those years.

The Fred Harris photo on page three courtesy of Kim Cooper at the Cornish Studies Library in Redruth. With thanks.

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