

The Attlee Letters

Thanks to the enterprise of Fred Harris and the teaching gift of exiled polymath Tom Attlee, the cause of adult education through the 1930s was perhaps better served in Cornwall than any other English county.¹ Harris organised WEA classes at which Attlee lectured; one such in Perranporth was attended by Winston Graham and the friendship that the two men struck up would have a significant influence on the author's professional life. For at some point (Tom's daughter-in-law Peggy states 1937²), WG began to show Attlee his manuscripts and Tom would read them and offer feedback. The first such written evidence of this relates to WG's seventh novel, *Keys of Chance*, published in 1939. However, WG dedicated his previous book, *The Giant's Chair* (1938) "to T.S.A." (i.e. Thomas Simons Attlee) indicating that their informal working relationship was probably extant by then. The Attlee family hold copies of twelve WG novels inscribed by the author to Tom (or, in one case, his wife) with the earliest inscription, in *Without Motive*, dated April 1936, taking their initial liaison back further still.³

Attlee, born in 1880 and Oxford educated, was a valuable mentor; his encouragement and advice through years when WG struggled, despite publication, to break through as a writer, must have been of great solace to the younger man. The RIC Archive in Truro⁴ holds copies of nine letters from Attlee to Graham, each written in a close and meticulous hand. All are transcribed in chronological order below, followed by a brief overview to close. The permission of the Attlee family to reproduce these texts is gratefully acknowledged.

NOTE Tom's somewhat erratic punctuation is reproduced as written. I have inserted a couple of missing words in [square brackets], added brief introductory notes and [footnotes](#) as necessary and, in the case of one or two illegible words, have made a "best guess" at what the author may have intended. Any mistakes are mine.

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(1) *Keys of Chance*

The book was published on 6 January 1939; the letter is undated and lacks a salutation.

Keys of Chance

My interest was held without faltering to the end : and I think there is a reasonable development, clear of irrelevancies and ragged ends, which marks a memorable pattern : contributing causes come in appropriately without coincidence : and I liked particularly the use of anti-climax in connection with Moses¹ (who will be, one expects, a deus ex machina – and he isn't – grotesquely).

A good story, therefore, and told with skill and certainty. I think that possibly the revelation on pages 142-4 ought to 'come out' (out of the safe, perhaps, when Mary rifles it) instead of being told direct by the author who passes over from observation (in the same case as the reader) to omniscience. See Forster² on the point.

The only point of construction that I find fault with is Bill's concealment of his intimate connection with the 'Penguin' disaster from Mary. Surely he had everything to gain by taking her entirely into his confidence from the start?

The shock of surprise, when it comes, is a good one, but, I submit, concealment must be justified by something other than his promise to Clapton. (And might not Fodcarre's agents have discovered Bill's identity – especially as his intimacy with Mary (who kept her own name) might have afforded a suggestion of some complicity? However, it is a fair risk.)

But my principal questions relate to Mary's character. I don't find adequate motive indicated for her incurring the serious risks involved in tackling Veerson and Fodcarre. If she were a Hamlet, convinced of her duty to avenge her father, she would be intelligible – but that is not a strong incentive with her, and is only dragged up reluctantly from a recollection of her father. Or if she were a Jane Eyre or Lucy Snowe³ – out to tame the presumptuous male (and liking the sport all the more for its danger) – I should understand her.

Below: "*Keys of Chance*", page two

critical of her attitude next morning when Bill proposed marriage. She had, surely, thought over the whole matter - it was a possibility after her first visit, & she had had lots of time to decide: it was not a sudden surprise, any of it. Wouldn't she have said either "Yes, of course I'm in love with you, or I wouldn't have taken you to bed with me last night" (being a nice girl) or "No, I don't love you, but we enjoyed ourselves last night, let's go on with it as long as we enjoy it" (not being a nice girl). She had no right whatever, I think, to take the line she did.

I'm inclined to believe that she was a more erotic young person than she realised: she knew the sort of man Vreeson was, what would occur if he went to his house late at night: and she looked forward (subconsciously) to finding him off & getting a good kick out of his indignation. Suddenly she saw the possibilities of a nightmarish scenario.

I don't say this in depreciation of Mary a bit: I like her & those are quite intelligent feelings: but I don't think she faced them. The creator (W.G.) did, & that's he, in her self-deception.

I think Vreeson is very well done & Foddeane an admirable foil to him & a criminal all the more convincing because he is drawn with restraint & (above all) doesn't go glibly as so many villains do.

Bill is an excellent specimen of his type: you avoid with ease those sentimental exaggerations which have spoiled the type so often. He is thoughtfully likeable than in the paths of his lameness ~~to~~ poses him (to his credit).

But I fear that he still looks on Mary as the Protector of Women - not the ^{Colleague} Partner. He might call Mary "little woman" one day. I hope she smacks his face. But I repeat he is well skilfully drawn & shows the virtues, not the defects of his sort.

I don't think you get into your stride till after about 50 pages. Did the first chapters have the resolution or done less than their successors? ~~CS~~

But I don't think mere boredom in a Bloomsbury Lodging House would have set her on to the adventure. (Later, of course, Veerson's high pay quite legitimately attracts her – but the decision is made before that is offered.)

Again as to her affair with Bill at Weatherways, I am critical of her attitude next morning when Bill proposed marriage. She had, surely, thought over the whole matter – it was a possibility after her first visit and she had had lots of time to decide : it was not a sudden surprise, any of it. Wouldn't she have said either "Yes, of course I'm in love with you, or I wouldn't have taken you to bed with me last night" (being a nice girl) or "No, I don't love you but we enjoyed ourselves last night, let's go on with it as long as we enjoy it." (not being a nice girl). She had no right whatever, I think, to take the line she did.

I'm inclined to believe that she was a more erotic young person than she realised : she knew the sort of man Veerson was and what would occur if she went to his house late at night : and she looked forward (subconsciously) to fending him off and getting a good kick out of her indignation. Similarly she saw the possibilities of a night at Weatherways.

I don't say this in depreciation of Mary a bit : I like her and those are quite intelligible feelings : but I don't think she faced them and her creator (W.G.) aids and abets her in her self-deception.

I think Veerson is very well done and Fodcarre an admirable foil to him and a criminal all the more convincing because he is drawn with restraint and (above all) doesn't go gloaty as so many villains do.

Bill is an excellent specimen of his type : and you avoid with ease those sentimentalisms and exaggerations which have spoilt the type so often. He is thoroughly likeable and hasn't let the pathos of his lameness possess him (to his credit).

But I fear that he still looks on Mary as the Protector of Woman – not the colleague / partner / fellow. He might call Mary "little woman" one day : and I hope she smacks his face. But I repeat he is well and firmly drawn and shows the virtues not the defects of his sort.

I don't think you get into your stride till after about 50 pages. Did the first chapters have to be rewritten or done later than their successors?

T. S. Attlee

¹ Moses the bulldog, "the best-behaved dog in the Home Counties", belongs to Bill, the book's male protagonist.

² Presumably journalist, critic and biographer John Forster (1812-1876)

³ Charlotte Brontë heroines from *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853) respectively.

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(2) Demelza

The letter is dated 27 July 1946; the book was published in December of the same year.

My dear friend,

I have finished 'Demelza'. I don't like to confide a precious M.S. to the post : shall wait till I am coming your way, and bring it. Or are you needing it at once? If the latter, I will arrange to run over with it forthwith.

I think the sequel is worthy of its precursor : it is a companion picture : they hang side by side harmoniously.

The wrecks are a splendid piece of description : the gaol at Launceston sticks (and stinks) in the memory. The pathos of Julia's death is poignant and beautifully restrained – "one shade the more, one ray the less"¹ would have spoilt it. And the whole business of the tin enterprises is excellently handled, suggesting a familiarity with the process and practices.

The characters behave as one would expect from the previous picture – consistently.

But a third volume seems to be necessary, because (I think) developments are indicated, prepared for, involved, but don't yet proceed.

For instance, the disastrous marriage of Mark Daniel and Keren – foredoomed to failure – is an excellent foil to Ross and Demelza's union, which didn't fail. Demelza found herself attractive to men (excellently done, at the Ball), found Ross neglectful and absorbed in his own pursuits : but she didn't go Keren's way. Quite right – but is the contrast sufficiently pointed?

Again Ross follows a better line than his fellow gentry. He might have gone on the same track as Francis. He didn't. Again that is justified in the reader's view. It was due to Demelza, wasn't it? But is the development in Ross indicated significantly? For instance, Demelza's quixotic generosity in visiting the sick Francis, Elizabeth and Charles appealed to the same spark in Ross (which made his initial rescue of Demelza feasible and showed itself in that expedition to the gaol at Launceston) : But I don't see the two impulses recognising and strengthening each other in the two protagonists : they run parallel only.

In volume III, Ross, having failed in his tin enterprises, will live much more at home and will be more directly and continuously influenced by his wife, and she by him.

There is, I think, a certain lack of climax in the book in contrast to vol. I. There we were all on tiptoe to see if Demelza would bring it off : here we have something of the same sort with Verity and the Captain but it settles down rather soon with a suggested domesticity with just a suggestion that Verity is a rather faded Patient Griselda² and the Captain and she might become an echo of Lieut. and Mrs Price in Mansfield Park.³

But again, you will show in vol. III how the venture was justified (and how Demelza was justified in her part of the business – they were predestined mates).

Are you already meditating the third volume of the trilogy?

I don't suggest that there is not development already. We see Demelza growing (especially in confidence) and changing her standards (e.g. at the Christening party) and learning (especially from Verity) what to reject and what retain in her environment, but you seem to me by your very sureness of touch in handling your folk to get speculation going as to the results of their relationships, which speculations are not yet satisfied.

King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid⁴ is a fine theme. In the case of the Emperor Justinian and the dancer Theodora,⁵ not only did Theodora learn from Justinian to be an Empress, but Justinian was saved by Theodora from abdicating!

Sincerely

T. S. Attlee

¹ A line from Byron's 1813 poem "She Walks in Beauty"

² A put-upon, long-suffering wife in *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio (c1313-1375) who turns up again 100 years later in "The Clerk's Tale" (ninth of Chaucer's 24 *Canterbury Tales*) *et cetera*.

³ Jane Austen's third novel, published in 1814

⁴ A celebrated 1884 painting by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones depicting African king Cophetua and his love for the beggar Penelophon. Based on an Elizabethan ballad and Tennyson's poem *The Beggar Maid* and regarded as one of the finest ever produced by a British artist, the work was admired both for its technical execution and theme of love and beauty transcending power and material wealth. Its egalitarian story (which would surely have struck a chord with Attlee) has also been connected with the socialism of Burne-Jones's close friend William Morris.

⁵ Justinian (c482-565) was a sixth century Byzantine Emperor and his wife Theodora (c500-548) reputedly a former actress, dancer, mime artist and comedienne. (Stella Duffy, *The Guardian*, 10 June 2010)

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(3) and (4) *Cordelia*

The book was published in May 1949. Attlee wrote two letters about the manuscript, the first, in response to having read it, dated 24 February 1948, then a second, dated 9 March 1948, in response to two letters (contents unknown) received from WG dated 26 February and 2 March.

First letter, dated 24 February 1948:

Dear Winston,

I have just finished *Cordelia* : and found it absorbing. I am struck with the ease with which you weave your pattern, so that the development of the story is convincing and consistent, while at the same

time you preserve the essential element of suspense : we are not sure how the moral will be pointed, though the moral is already clear.

I think Uncle Pridey's advice to Cordelia is masterly : it puts the whole series of situations into perspective : and the explanation is satisfying. Moreover he enunciates his wisdom tersely : and every word rings true. It's exceedingly well done; the tail-piece shows that he saw clearly forwards as well as backwards; and Cordelia will work out her destiny as he surmises.

The atmosphere throughout is authentically Victorian : and Grove House especially has just that solid and oppressive opulence, which I recollect in childhood at some houses where we went to children's parties, producing shyness in a small boy conscious of unfamiliar grandeur.

Also I have no doubt that the Music Hall was like that, but I never entered such a place : I would as soon [have] thought of attending a chapel.

There are one or two good bits of description, too, when Cordelia and Crossley are love-making together – accurately reproducing the enhanced sensibility and environment which characterises such moments : and the picture sticks in the memory.

Where I was conscious of deficiency, I think it's my fault, not yours. For instance, I haven't a picture of Cordelia. I would like some help in visualising her – is she, for instance, like one of Botticelli's angels? They have character as well as charm, initiative as well as adoration : but I see Cordelia (which is all wrong) as wild-rose complexion, yellow ringlets and sweetness, without that evidence of capacity which Mr Ferguson rightly prized.

Also I wasn't taken in by Crossley at any stage and I think I should have been. Cordelia was very young (as Pridey pointed out) and, finding him physically attractive, endowed him with character to match.

Very true to life and, I should think, always happening, but I should have liked her to have doubts earlier or Crossley to show promise (unfulfilled) of something better.

Mr Ferguson is excellently drawn without a trace of that caricature which dogs the painter of portraits of past dignitaries.

The opening is admirable; and so is the close. In between I found my interest held continuously, so that I went on reading till past midnight

on three successive nights.

I think the outstanding merit of the book is its construction – the development of the initial situation works out inevitably : and the author's judgement at the end holds good for mankind in general not only for Cordelia : it is reality not romance, essential courage instead of self-pitying humbug : and one puts it down with a sense of satisfaction.

The characterisation is sound : but doesn't embrace such an original creation as Demelza, I think. I hadn't met her before, but have encountered Brook, Crossley, Slaney-Smith and the rest. Slaney-Smith, in fact, lived in a London suburb 40 years ago and belonged to an Essay Club of which I was a member : and he was just as you depict him.

I enclose a bit of typing error.

I can't see a chance of running over, I'm afraid, in the car in order to return the M.S. Will you come here? If so, supper and darts (if you can manage it on your petrol) : or I could take it into Truro on a day when I have a Committee.

Sincerely

T. S. Attlee

Second letter, dated 9 March 1948, written after WG had responded – twice in five days – to the one above:

Dear Winston,

Your two letters (Feb 26th and March 2nd) raise most interesting questions : and I have been brooding over them.

1. I see your point about Stephen's character : I hadn't considered what you point out – that making him less a cad would make Cordelia appear a prig. That's true. I think he must remain a cad; but perhaps a more likeable cad. There are people whom one's judgement rejects but one's palette insists on tasting again – like sweets which threaten to make you sick but prove (or did, in youth) irresistible. Your re-writing will do that.

2. To make me see Cordelia. You're quite right. It's not a description that's required but (as you say) "a word here and there, how she stretches herself, the glint in her eye" and so on. Excellent.

I remember a character in a book by E. H. Young¹, who says to the girl "I can't help it : you're selfish and a snob : but I love the way you do things – everything." That's the theme.

3. Over-long anywhere? No. Possibly Slaney-Smith repeats his fundamental assumptions too often : but that only seems so to me because, as I said, I knew him already : and I'm bound to say he did reiterate his enlightened situation at every encounter.

4. You find F. Ferguson's confession to Cordelia after Brook's death obvious and pedestrian. But surely that is in character. He wouldn't break his shell and disclose wings – not at his age. I think that's convincing all right.

5. Is the little prologue adequate? Admirably conceived, I think : and essential : it sets the scene. But would you consider a little bit of detail – a few touches to make it clear that it is not an old, picturesque, dignified "Old-World" house? It has (hasn't it?) Venetian blinds, brass gas-brackets, shutters and architraves and doors in birds-eye maple (or skilfully grained to imitate it faithfully). The ceiling has a centrepiece, heavily moulded, from which the chandelier depends. Everything is well finished, what the specification called Superior Quality : but it's not far enough back, yet, to be "Period". Fifty years hence, antiquarians will prize it and denounce its destruction as Philistine : at this moment Superior Persons dub its producers and preservers Philistine.

6. Is the humour old-fashioned : and does the author show that he realises this, but considers it appropriate? Yes to both questions. I didn't comment on that point because humour is so capricious and some would chuckle while others would grunt, peevishly, at such a scene, for instance, as the mouse-scene at the wedding.

I didn't chuckle, as a matter of fact. The woman who screams at mice ranks in my mind with the architect who left out the staircase : legitimate jests : but, for some obscure reason, I don't smile.

7. Stephen's reflections. Yes, I think you've done well to cut out some of them. I don't like reflections, though I don't see how you can avoid using them – just as an occasional soliloquy on the stage can't be avoided.

8. Jean's point that Brook might have been a bit nicer in the early stages and more in love with Cordelia is a sound one, I think.

On page 42, that business of the scramble on the roof and Cordelia framed in the doorway afterwards – an attractive picture : couldn't Brook be struck unexpectedly by it and suddenly surmise that his father is building better than he knew? Every now and then the vision would return; and banish his peevishness and solace his ailment – momentarily only (alas!).

9. I await your next letter; and meanwhile I'm browsing over the book, hunting for defects, rather than savouring its virtues.

Sincerely

T. S. Attlee

¹ Emily Hilda Young (1880-1949), an English novelist and suffragette supporter, born in Whitley Bay, Northumberland (now Tyne and Wear); in her day a best-selling author, now largely forgotten.

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(5) *Night Without Stars*

The book was published in January 1950; the letter bears no date, salutation or signature.

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.

(1) The plot seems to me ingenious and admirably worked out, with the surprises coming just where they tell best – E.G. the disappearance of Café Gambetta, Giles' lighting on Grogard's body, Alix's relationship to Charles revealed. The opportunity offered by the onset of blindness and the restoration of sight is exploited very well. The detail of the eye operation is convincing and made me thoroughly uncomfortable : and the

climb back to the road after the car smash is horribly breath-taking. I think that purpose of the book is fully achieved.

(2) The state of mind revealed E.G. at the dinner-party at the Wintertons' is, I should think, true to life. They put their attitude succinctly : inevitably they are types rather than individuals, mouthpieces rather than living people seen in the round. That doesn't matter in this connection, but what does matter is that

(3) Giles and Alix don't come out of their picture frame (this may be my fault, not yours). You set yourself a difficult task, because each of them has a grievance against life; and unfortunately a grievance, however justified, evaporates sympathy; we aren't going to get on terms with them easily anyhow : and I don't get a glimpse of what Giles is potentially, what Alix was before she married, what both may be if they get a chance to "live happily ever after". Could you provide – obliquely, perhaps, through Rachel or through any of his friends – a sight of Giles as his friends see him? I don't see him – to recognise – as I do (for instance) almost any of the characters in Ross Poldark. Likewise Alix is only any French girl – a brief reference from one or two of those who knew her would illuminate her characteristics (E.G. that impulsiveness of hers). Which leads on to

(4) their love story. If I don't see them as the world sees them, still less do I see them as they saw each other. What made Giles decide that Alix was more than any other young woman with an average capacity for pity? What made Alix take more interest in Giles than any decently kindly person would take in a physically handicapped fellow-creature thrown in her way by a mishap?

What is needed, I think, is a more intense concentration by you on these creatures of yours, so that under your scrutinising eye they betray themselves unconsciously – when Giles can't get Alix out of his head (before he regained his sight) he recalls the quality of her voice over two phrases or expressions that he wants to hear again, the touch of her hand – somehow different from other people's : and when he regains his sight,

what he sees confirms and emphasises what he had divined in his blindness.

And on Alix's side – there was something which she penetrated in Giles : the attraction wasn't only the unconscious pathos of a blinded man needing mothering : what was it?

It's a matter of those apparently trivial, really decisive, words and deeds which make and break relationships. Cf. the woman in Browning's poem "In a Year"

Was it something done
Something said,
Vexed him? was it touch of hand
Turn of head?
Strange! that very way
Love begun
I as little understand
Love's decay.¹

or is it my imagination and sympathy that have been drowsy, and failed to catch the whispers you've provided? I know you give pointers (E.G. 298) : but somehow I don't visualise what is pointed at.

The writing seems to me delightfully easy and straightforward. Only one place (see notes) where I think the hand momentarily faltered.

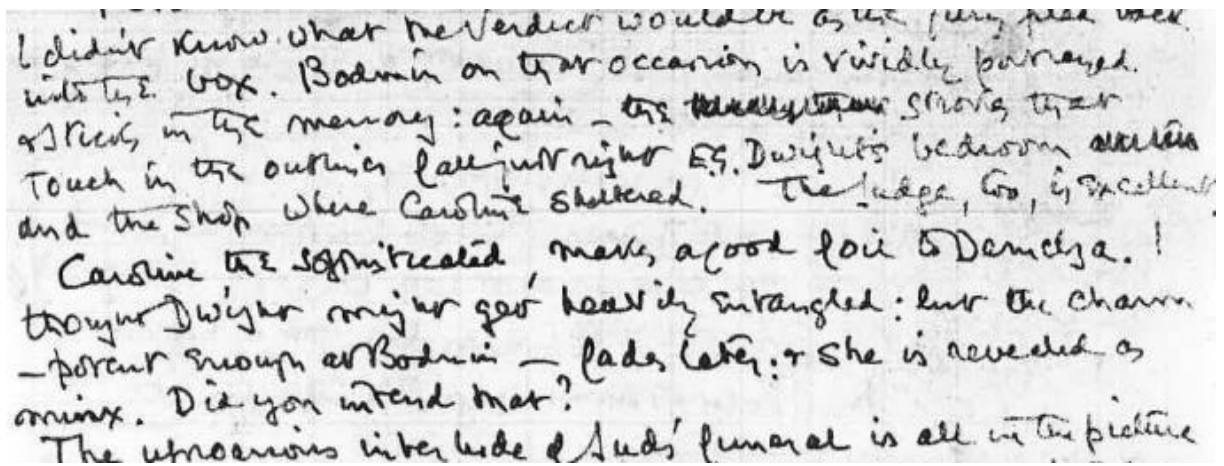
A device which I don't care for (but that's a private prejudice) is the staccato recording of the thoughts that pass through the narrator's mind at moments of crisis (354.18ff)

¹ The second of ten stanzas from "In A Year" by Robert Browning (1812-1889) (see also note 2, page 18 and note 4, page 24 on the same topic). It appears that the poem was first published in 1842. It is clear from his harmless transposition of the words "said" and "done" in the first two lines that Attlee wrote the verse from memory. He knew his poet well.

(6) Jeremy Poldark

The book was published in October 1950 with an author's note (absent in later editions) specifically thanking "Mr. T. S. Attlee, Mr. F. L. Harris and Mr. J. N. Rosewarne for their advice and encouragement in this work from the beginning"; the letter (see page one excerpt below) bears no date, salutation or signature.

I think the third volume of the trilogy is even better than its predecessors. Demelza develops convincingly, never inconsistent with her origin, but showing how her native wit built something onto it which was arresting because of its unusualness. The touches that make up her portrait are few but exactly right. E.G. her naïve interventions on Ross's behalf before the trial are convincing in their blend of shrewdness and innocence.



I didn't know what the verdict would be as the jury filed back into the box. Bodmin on that occasion is vividly portrayed, & sticks in the memory: again - the ~~strokes~~ strokes that touch in the outlines fall just right E.G. Dwight's bedroom and the shop where Caroline sheltered. The judge, too, is excellent. Caroline the sophisticated, makes a good foil to Demelza. I thought Dwight might get heavily entangled: but the charm - potent enough at Bodmin - fades later: & she is revealed as minx. Did you intend that? The atrocious interlude of Auld's funeral is all in the picture

I think the whole business of the assizes is handled finely. I didn't know what the verdict would be as the jury filed back into the box. Bodmin on that occasion is vividly portrayed, and sticks in the memory: again - the strokes that touch in the outlines fall just right E.G. Dwight's bedroom and the shop where Caroline sheltered. The judge, too, is excellent.

Caroline the sophisticated makes a good foil to Demelza, though Dwight might get heavily entangled: but the charm - potent enough at Bodmin - fades later: and she is revealed as a minx. Did you intend that?

The uproarious interlude of Jud's funeral is all in the picture – Hogarth and Rowlandson and Collins,¹ I think, the Smollett prototype.² I have a blind spot, though, for drunks : and when I encounter one in a bus I'm disgusted not diverted. So I accept it, but with acquiescence only.

The arrival of Verity's step-children is most admirably done. Their brief intervention is true in all particulars and the breezy common sense of the boy shows up the (intelligible but unjustifiable) sensibility of the girl.

And the other familiar characters do their part, as we should expect.

A notable feature is the revelation of the medical practice of the day – outlook, technical terms and all : most revealing.

I don't find any passages to question : the only real criticism relates to Ross. He does not, I think, reveal the impact of Demelza's personality on his. He influenced her by changing her environment, giving her the stimulating aim of living up to him as she saw him.

But she, I suggest, should have changed him more than is apparent. He's true to type, all right : the strong uncompromising master with a past and a grievance and a right to be surly : and, in fact, they do not change readily. It took a conflagration and the loss of his eyesight to soften up Mr Rochester (who is, I think, the grandfather of all that sort of hero).³

But shouldn't the passing years have brought a diminution of egoism and, as a result, a sense of proportion, which is a sense of humour?

Elizabeth Bennet, you will remember, looked forward to laughing at Darcy with Darcy (though she decided, wisely, that the first week of the engagement was too soon to begin).⁴ Is that being captious? Perhaps the boy, as he grew up, worked the miracle of removing the egoist from the field of his own telescope.

I'm thinking of Chesterton's view⁵ that the characteristic of the novel (as contrasted with the romance) is the delineation of the impact of character on character : you've done it deftly with Demelza.

¹ William Hogarth (1697-1764), Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827) and William (father of Wilkie) Collins (1788-1847) were all London-born painters of distinction.

² Tobias Smollett (1721-1771) was a Renton-born poet and author. Declared by Orwell "Scotland's best novelist", he is name-checked in both *Vanity Fair* by Thackeray and *Eliot's*

Middlemarch and said to have been a primary influence on Dickens.

³ Mr Rochester is a central character in Charlotte Brontë's 1847 novel *Jane Eyre*

⁴ The reference here is to Jane Austen's celebrated second novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)

⁵ G(ilbert) K(eith) Chesterton (1874-1936): an English writer, poet, philosopher, dramatist, journalist, orator, lay theologian, biographer and critic of literature and art. The source of this "view" is not clear.

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(7) *Fortune is a Woman*

The book was published in December 1952; the letter bears no date, salutation or signature. Unusually, WG seems not to have given a presentation copy to his mentor (none, at least, is retained by his family).

I found the plot absorbing, all the more so because the work of Assessors and Adjusters¹ is unfamiliar and you disclose a wide field of semi-detective activity. Suspense is well-sustained and the final result is convincing.

I don't think the story, though, makes its full impression on the reader from the start because he lacks certain essential bits of equipment.

Page 4 line 6: Shouldn't a bit of description – thumbnail sketch – come in here (such as you give P104 L21-24 and P171 L14-23)? We want to know what it was that Oliver saw in Sarah, looking sideways at her as she drove the car, which stuck in his memory through all those years and made him recognise her at once when he met her again. The brief description of Mrs Litchen P46 L9-13 is most illuminating – the salient characteristics in four lines. Shouldn't there be an equivalent revelation here? It's too long to wait till P104 (and the plump girl in a black dress suggests to me a Lyons waitress – a nice girl but not Sarah).

P48 L23-24: That is, I think, the first intimation we have of Oliver's appearance and I don't think it's enough (after all, we see what we look for; and Mrs Litchen's area of search was not extensive).

We want to know what Sarah saw and heard when she met Oliver again : those small revealing touches (c.f. Robert Browning's poem "In A Year")² which makes us acquainted with hero and heroine.

A small point – that black hair of Sarah's that looks bronzy in some lights. I don't visualise it (probably my obtuseness). I know bronze coming out of brown when the sun hits it : but not out of black.

P24-25, end of chapter 2: an opening here for a little more revelation.

P28 L18-19: not enough description here, I suggest.

P36 L12: the house. Could you take us round the old place at greater length and in more penetrating appreciation of detail? That would be in character for Oliver – his work necessitated that particularity. C.f. those masterly descriptions in Dickens of Todgers' (in Martin Chuzzlewit) and Bleak House³ when shrewdly selected detail gives the character. I should cut out the diamond panes – not because they are out of character, but because they have been put into so many Old Cottage Tea Rooms that they suggest fake old not real old (in the same way you can't sheet walls with marble as the Byzantines did because Lyons does – and the association is café not church).

P128 L6-7: The house (continued). Wouldn't you have a great solid bannister that looks as safe as anything; but the wood worm has reduced it to a shell? That is what actually happens – unless you have observed the little holes, you may lean on it comfortably, and it suddenly gives a crunch and a cloud of dust and your nose hits the floor. Your introduction of lath and plaster suggests that sham-old character which we want to avoid in Lowis manor house. It was genuine all right – but decayed.

P126 L20: Soft wood. I suggest that the faker wouldn't be as stupid as that. It would be easy to get a piece of hard wood and he would probably get an old bit of the same sort of wood that Lippi used (otherwise he would be asking for detection – like forging a Victorian letter on Edwardian notepaper). I appreciate your problem. You've got to indicate how Oliver spotted the fake (would that book – just out – on "Van Meegeren's Faked Vermeers and de Hooghs" by Dr P. Coremans (Cassell 25/-)⁴ give suggestions?).

P130 L11-15: I don't like that device whereby staccato soliloquy invades narrative. But probably that's a personal foible.

My impression is that the telling of the story is not quite up to the merits of the story. Your handicap is that it is told by Oliver, and he is a personal-minded fellow, doesn't lose himself in his job or environment, sees everything in relation to that grudge he has against society – at the beginning when he's down and out, and even after (which is accurate enough psychologically); and he wants to gobble up Sarah (and feel a right to do so) not to serve her. So his capacity for appreciation is limited. But his love for Sarah should have quickened his sensibility. I don't think it did – enough – the story suggests.

E.G. "In a Year"

When I sewed or drew
I recall
How he looked as if I sung –
Sweetly too
When I spoke a word,
First of all
Up his cheek the colour sprung
Then he heard.²

¹ Oliver Branwell, protagonist of the novel, is an insurance claims adjuster.

² "In a Year" by Robert Browning (1812-1889) was clearly a favourite poem of Tom's. He quotes its second stanza in his letter about *Night Without Stars* (see page 13 above) and its third here – again a single wrong word ("when" instead of "if" in the fifth line) indicates that he's quoting from memory which shows in turn his level of familiarity with the work of, along with Meredith, "his favourite nineteenth century author" (see note 4, page 24 below).

³ *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843) and *Bleak House* (1852) by Charles Dickens

⁴ *Van Meegeren's Faked Vermeers and de Hooghs* by P. B. Coremans, translated by A. Hardy and C. Hutt (Cassell, London, 1949)

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(8) Warleggan

The book was published in November 1953; WG's dedication in the copy he gave TSA ends "Again thank you for help and advice."⁵ The letter bears no date, salutation or signature.

I think the fourth instalment of the Poldark series is a worthy successor to its distinguished ancestors. The structure is admirable, the different elements in the pattern dropping into place just when they are wanted to develop the composition. It is, I think, a little slow in getting into its stride – book 1 is sustained by anticipation of what is to come rather than its own momentum.

The 'high lights' are brilliant – the smugglers' catastrophe and Ross's scuffling fight in particular : and Francis's death convincingly horrible. Your familiarity with the intricacies of medical and mining practice at that date amazes me. The suspense about the mine is well sustained and makes a background that throws into sharp relief the contrast between Ross's near-bankruptcy and the accumulating opulence of the Warleggans : and when long-deferred success at last relieves the tension from Ross's side the effect on the relations of the parties is appropriate.

A point of criticism that I have may reflect my insensitiveness not a defect in characterisation : put briefly I don't get the impression that the emotions of the parties concerned had reached a temperature which made boiling over (Ross's ravishing of Elizabeth, Demelza's counter-offensive at the dance) inevitable. Moreover, while I realise that the Dwight-Caroline affair must simmer at a lower temperature in order to make contrast with the main turbulence, I couldn't convince myself that they ever really meant business; and I felt no surprise at the evaporation of the elopement; and I expected them to dry their eyes and forget it and not have their ashy resignation blown into a flame of passion by Ross's endeavours.

But, apart from that, the affairs are managed more dextrously. Demelza I find more convincing than Elizabeth : her amateurish enterprise with McNeil and subsequent revulsion is true to life and to her character : and the dissolving of the tension in the comedy of Treneglos and Bodrigan's collision at the bedroom door is delicious.

The concluding scene is, I think, masterly. That is how it happened – true to both of them, not a word wrong : life itself, not a staged situation.

I think it may be felt that there is a certain woodenness in dialogue, especially Dwight and Caroline who never lose consciousness of their inhibitions : and Ross doesn't seem able to relax but remains perhaps too consistently sardonic à la Rochester.¹ When I say woodenness I'm thinking of that quality in Thomas Hardy's characters like Angel Clare.²

Do you think there might be a little whiff of description of the person – a signature tune, so to speak – which would illuminate Caroline? I don't get a true vision of her, but her red hair, green eyes and freckles suggest, irresistibly, Queen Elizabeth³ in her youth : and that draws admiration but not affection, still less passion. I know Demelza well and see her clearly; Elizabeth too, but not so intimately.

You manage the whole thing with such ability – knowing what effect you want and getting it – that I note few queries : here they are.

Book 1, page 34, line 5 "own" should be "owe". P104, line 15 "itself" should be "herself". Book 2, page 40, line 3 "The four to dig it was six" seems obscure. P216 line 1 "Tremored" – legitimate? P272, line 5 "Queen" – should it be "King"? P292, lines 4 and 20 I don't think "function" was so employed at that date.

I note as especially brilliant, clear cut pictures top 214-223, 305-6, 395, 418 bottom and 419 top. I wonder whether it would equip readers' appreciation to have a few more such 'pictures' – especially of Nampara with Demelza and with Ross at their domestic activities : so that we know them when they are off their guard engaged in jobs irrelevant to the story but decorating it?

Lines pencilled onto bottom of letter in WG's hand:

214 Demelza making cream and waiting for Ross's return. His arrival to say that their mortgage has been redeemed and the presents he brings and their happiness together.

305 Demelza before the smuggling visit busy in her kitchen, playing with the kitten etc

395 Description of weather and Demelza's preoccupation in her garden just before the collapse of the mine.

419 Description of the farm and the sea when Demelza wakes on the morning of Ross's betrayal.

¹ See note 3, page 16

² Milksop lover of the eponymous protagonist of Hardy's 1892 novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

³ Though Queen Elizabeth II had probably been on the throne for some months by the time this letter was written, the reference here is clearly to Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603)

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(9) *The Little Walls*

The book was published in May 1955; the letter was written more than a year earlier, on 11 March 1954, again giving WG ample time to consider possible revisions in light of Tom's adverse comments. In contrast to Cordelia, however (see page 26 below), the degree of change this time can only be guessed at. It may be significant that, as with Fortune is a Woman, which Tom wasn't over-fond of either, the Attlee family hold no presentation copy of this novel.

My dear Winston,

I think that my comments on "The Little Walls" may expose my deficiencies in appreciation instead of illuminating the quality of the book: because certain purposes in novels and methods of achieving those purposes provoke no admiration of the work of art even though I can recognise it as a work of art. For instance, the work of Henry James¹ in the past and Miss Compton Burnett² in the present seem to me to be ingenious; but it's ingenuity to no adequate end. So, if you will look on my comments in that light, I will stick my neck out and expect to get my head chopped off on Monday.

I think you set yourself an impossible task in making that particular character the narrator. He is an egoist and though the exploration of an

egoism is a legitimate and fruitful theme for a novel, the narrator must not be the egoist: he is disabled by his egoism from doing that job. For the character that is under the microscope must be revealed; the egoist will only describe himself. Moreover, we expect a vivid presentation of circumstances to reveal character; and the egoist is interested not in circumstances but in his own reaction to them (as Chesterton said of George Moore³ – he couldn't write "It was a fine day" but "the day, it seemed to me, was fine".).

Imagine what "The Egoist" would have been if the narrator had been not George Meredith but Sir Willoughby Patterne.⁴

I call him an egoist because he is imprisoned in himself and only shows some faint sign of getting out of prison in the last few chapters. He thinks he is moved by sorrow for Grevil's death: but he isn't: he takes all that trouble in the hope of getting rid of the uncomfortable state of mind that that event has put him into. He thinks he is in love with Leonie, but his feeling for her takes no account of what is best for her: all he wants is (in Shaw's phrase)⁵ to gobble her up and when he can't, he is in a childish despair and ready for suicide.

I found no evidence anywhere in the story that he had any interest [in] or perception of other characters excepting as they ministered to or obstructed his intentions. As a result, the author can't delight us with the exercise of his talent for vivid description: he is faithful to the character of the narrator, who is blinded by his obsession. But there is one moment when his sensibility is really sharpened – in the blue cave with Leonie: for a moment he is out of himself and in love: and – rightly – we get a bit of beautiful and convincing description.

But the colour and significance goes out of the landscape and he figures in it when he's possessed again of his grievance e.g. after the fight and Leonie telling him that Martin is her husband.

I admit that towards the end of the story he begins to get a glimmering of his malady: that is the climax, admirably devised, but it's too late. If the narrator is to convince us he must establish friendly relations from the start: and the man who describes himself instead of revealing himself leaves us cold.

A criticism that I have made before (but perhaps it reflects a personal taste) is the validity of the method of description employed

when there is danger of conflict E.G. in the fights between the narrator and Martin. He employs staccato, truncated, unfinished sentences with an impression of heartlessness. This is appropriate to a reporter on the wireless, reporting a football match or horse race that is actually proceeding as he speaks. But in this narrative it is emotion recollected in tranquillity – isn't it? The switch over to a breathless present tense is illegitimate.

Again, he is telling us at leisure a story of which he knows the conclusion. He must, I suggest, admit this. He needn't – shouldn't – give away the secret en route: but to act as if he didn't know is unconvincing.

The final scene – Leonie and the narrator clearing up their relations in public at the supper table is a tour-de-force : but more than I can swallow. They wouldn't do it. Moreover, they, to my mind, are too hesitant, elliptical, allusive in their duologues. They had plenty of time to think over what they would say next time they met. I don't expect collected, incisive exchanges that were achieved by (e.g.) Elizabeth Bennet or Jane Eyre. But gasped or muttered innuendo is not enough.

I have devoted this letter to depreciations: on the other side is the ingenious and deftly handled plot: the vividly realised moments e.g. the guzzling Dutchman eating and smoking simultaneously which fills me with delight and disgust – the underlying purpose in the revelation that Martin, with all his faults, was very different from what he appeared either before or after his unmasking: the scraps of philosophising in which the characters state clues to their attitudes.

There is the structure – worth seeing : but I submit that we can't appreciate it through the distorting glasses the narrator supplies.

An inevitable result of entrusting the narrative to that particular character is, I suggest, a lack of a sense of proportion (which is a sense of humour). I have been driven back to my recollection of the preface to *The Egoist* and the absolute necessity of surveying the antics of human creatures under the broad illumination of the Comic Spirit instead of scrutinising them through the 'watch-maker's eye in luminous rings eruptive of the infinitesimal.'¹⁶

If the narrator as a good citizen had denounced Martin to the police for breaking legal regulations he would have been respectable. But as

taking over from God vengeance for Martin's breach of the moral law, he becomes an object of derision.

Sincerely

T. S. Attlee

¹ Henry James (1843-1916), author and critic; "one of the key figures of transatlantic literature".

² English novelist Dame Ivy Compton Burnett (1884-1969).

³ George Moore (1852-1933): a prolific author of novels, short fiction, poetry, plays, memoirs and criticism; "often regarded as the first great modern Irish novelist".

⁴ "George Meredith's 1879 novel *The Egoist* is one of the major comic novels in the language. In telling the story of Clara Middleton's struggle to extricate herself from her engagement to Sir Willoughby Patterne, the novel presents an ironic subversion of texts that had shaped the pattern of Victorian femininity." (Sue Zlosnik). According to Tom's daughter-in-law biographer Peggy, Meredith and Browning were Attlee's "favourite nineteenth century authors".

⁵ George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950): an Irish playwright, critic and polemicist whose influence on Western theatre, culture and politics extended from the 1880s to his death and beyond.

⁶ A quotation from the Prelude to Meredith's *The Egoist* (see 4 above)

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These letters are of interest first for the fascinating glimpse they give into the incisive mind and self-deprecating character of their author. It is more apparent on reading them through in the space of an hour than it would have been to Mr Attlee over the span of the sixteen years that a number of themes recur, for example, his thrice-noted dislike of "staccato soliloquy" or "recording of ... thoughts"; the importance to him of Browning's 1842 poem "In a Year", from which he twice quotes stanzas; likewise Brontë's thrice-cited *Jane Eyre*. Then there's his aversion to louche behaviour, exemplified in his

letters by drunks on buses, hysteria in a woman, condescension in a man, and patronage of music hall and chapel. Concerning his friend's texts, Attlee is fulsome in his praise – splendid; absorbing; convincing; ingenious and admirably worked out; even better than its predecessors; a worthy successor to its distinguished ancestors – and gentle in his criticisms, which he is quick to attribute, often as not, to "*my obtuseness / my fault / my insensitiveness / my deficiencies in appreciation*". But that he made them all the same, in detail and sometimes at length, was useful – had he not, indeed, there would have been little point to the exercise, and that WG continued with it long after he'd found his feet and gained a following surely confirms the value that he himself placed on the relationship. Attlee's particular areas of expertise – architecture, history and nineteenth century literature – were an asset, freely shared, too precious to squander and Tom's would remain one of a coterie of like minds the author shamelessly and quite properly plundered for the better, more authentic realisation of his works. The effect of each man on the other seems, to judge by these letters, to have been wholly and mutually beneficial.

But how much of Tom's sometimes trenchant criticism (see in particular the *Little Walls* letter)⁶ did WG take on board; to what extent (if any) was he persuaded to revise his work? In the absence of the early drafts which Tom read, of course, this most intriguing of questions is not easy to answer. But there are pointers nonetheless. Concerning *Fortune is a Woman*, Tom commented that "the plump girl in a black dress suggests to me a Lyons waitress – a nice girl but not Sarah" – and in the published book that description is gone (when Oliver first meets her, Sarah is "tallish and fairly plump" and wears a coat). He objects to the notion of black hair shining "bronzy ... when the sun hits it"; again, the book offers "curly dark hair with a touch of bronze" (page 79) and the sun turning "all (her hair's) darkness into copper" (page 122) – but there is no juxtaposition anywhere of "black" and "bronze". Tom points WG towards a then-recently published book about art forger Han van Meegeren, to whom WG lightly alludes on page 87 as "that Dutchman". Tom suggests that the "diamond panes" of Lowis Manor should be "cut out" and "lath and plaster ... avoid(ed)" – in the novel neither feature is mentioned.

But WG kept an open mind. He rejected, for instance, Tom's suggestion that no forger of pictures would be so foolish as to use a soft wood frame if the original's was hard – and since the intended fate of the pictures was to be burnt and then made the subject of an insurance claim, he was fully justified in doing so, since, in these circumstances, the copier runs no risk because he breaks no law; the criminal is the submitter of the fraudulent claim; no fire, no crime, so why not?

Since the *Fortune* letter is undated, we cannot know how long an interval passed between its writing and the book's publication (and, therefore, what chance WG had to make significant revisions even had he wished to). But in the case of *Cordelia*, we can say, thanks to dated letters, that between Tom's first written response to reading the MS and the book's publication was a gap of fifteen months i.e. plenty of time for reconsideration and revision. And a letter sent by WG with Tom's presentation copy of the published novel indicates that it was indeed "considerably cut"; also that the defining characteristics of key figures were modified and the ending reworked and rebalanced, presumably all in response to observations proffered by Attlee. Here's what WG said:

Dear T.S.A.,

Herewith another addition to the housing problem in your overcrowded bookshelves. I don't suppose you will want to read it again, but you would find it had been considerably cut and some alterations made from the MS. I have tried to take the "ringlets" effect out of Cordelia's character and to make Stephen less obviously a seducer; also have re-written somewhat Mr Ferguson's confession of unfaith near the end. The book now ends more on the Cordelia-Mr Ferguson note than on the Cordelia-Robert Birch note. A pleasant review in the Times Lit. Sup., but that's all so far ...

Best regards

Winston⁷

Cordelia was the novel that launched WG in the United States, thus an important stepping stone in his nascent, soon to be burgeoning career. It's pleasing to discover that an unobtrusive but most effective helping hand in this process came from his loyal servant and friend Tom Attlee.

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NOTES AND SOURCES

¹ For more on all this, see [WEA](#).

² *With a Quiet Conscience – A Biography of Thomas Simons Attlee (1880-1960)* by Peggy Attlee, Dove & Chough Press, 1995

³ Personal correspondence to this author

⁴ The Graham Archive is held by the Courtney Library of the Royal Cornwall Museum, the Royal Institution of Cornwall, River Street, Truro, TR1 2SJ

⁵ The inscription reads in full:

Dear T.S.A.,

I am sending you this just to add to the housing problems on your bookshelves. The map is from one drawn by William Tunnickliff, Surveyor in 1791 with certain necessary additions by me.

Again thank you for help and advice.

Winston

⁶ As with *Cordelia*, Tom's response to reading the *Little Walls* MS was written more than a year before the book's publication and what he had to say surely gave WG much food for thought. It is likely, therefore, that his influence on the end product was significant – though since (in contrast to *Fortune is a Woman*) his objections concerned more style than detail, ultimately it's

hard to know. But what can be said with certainty is that, soon after its eventual publication in May 1955, *The Little Walls* was chosen as the Crime Writers Association's first "Novel of the Year" – due recognition for its diligent author, of course, but also for the guiding hand that helped him with patient solicitude on his way?

⁷ Letter held by the Attlee family

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Below: page 66 from a proof copy of *The Little Walls*, showing a revision pasted on by WG. Interestingly, these new lines were incorporated into the text of the book, but then further revised before publication. Novels would be amended yet more (and some e.g. *Take My Life* quite extensively) between one hardback edition and the next, or between hardback and paperback editions. WG was so much the perfectionist that his books were seemingly never so much finished as works in progress.

portant thing, a mature man of promise. There was no staling in him—along with maturity there was this constant renewal, so to say. Nothing of his youthful approach had been lost. He was ripe for big things. That is why it is so tragic."

"And inexplicable."

"And inexplicable." He was silent for a time.

I said: "Do you attempt to explain it, even to yourself?"

"Only by the recollection that Grevil Turner was a good man and a very unusual one."

"I don't see what follows."

"No. Nothing follows. It is just the feeling that one has to strive to see through this veil that his death has cast. ~~One~~

Always your brother was a man to set himself the impossible task. How would he, I have been wondering, tolerate failure, from whatever source it came?"

"How does anyone?"

"That is so. But the ordinary man does not risk as much to begin, or surely feel as much to finish. His standards, let us admit it, are flexible; they adapt themselves more quickly to the need of the hour. Whereas the man of high ideals such as your brother sometimes has not the spiritual ambiguity to compromise. He cannot or he will not. They must conquer or die who have

It struck me again that in all these speculations about the mystery of Grevil's death, every person, Arnold, Colonel Powell, Martin Coxon, and now ~~himself~~ ^{few} Louis Joachim, really only imagined what *they* might or could have done themselves, so that instead of a projection you got a reflection. Each one put himself in Grevil's place and interpreted or speculated according to his own temperament. None of them really knew or understood what Grevil had thought. Perhaps that was impossible. Perhaps that exacting problem was mine alone to solve. And I could do it not by any