

***My dear Richard* : WG and Richard Church**

Richard Church (1893-1972)¹ was an English writer. Though best-known as a poet and critic, he also wrote novels, essays, verse plays, travel books and fiction for children. His 1937 novel *The Porch* won the Femina Vie Heureuse Prize² and 1955's *Over the Bridge*, first of three acclaimed volumes of autobiography, the Sunday Times Prize for Literature.³ Church, thrice-married, was made a CBE⁴ in 1957.



Though Church and WG corresponded for at least the last fifteen years of the older man's life, exactly when and how their association began is unclear. It may well have been common friend Frank Swinnerton who first brought them together. Church had become acquainted with Swinnerton

(who seemed to know everyone) in 1933⁵ and their friendship ripened through the years via regular meetings and correspondence – and Swinnerton had also been in touch with WG since 1943. A letter dated 14 February 1956⁶ which records the three men lunching together provides the earliest documented confirmation of a WG / Church link (with Church not at that point having reviewed any WG novel). Possibly they met in the Savile Club, which WG joined in 1950 and to which Church also belonged, or perhaps it was mere literary lunch happenstance. We'll probably never know.

But since friendships may be forged in myriad trivial or random ways, what does it matter? It matters only because the writer, in cultivating a critic, may have – or be seen or thought to have – an ulterior motive. To give him his due, WG was aware from the outset of the potentially problematic relationship between author and (the supposedly disinterested) critic. Though tempted as a tyro to make contact with Swinnerton, who reviewed for *The Observer* and whose writing he admired, young WG had declined to do so in order to avoid any suspicion of acting not altruistically but in thinly disguised self-interest (or, as he more pithily put it, of "cupboard love"⁷). He first wrote only when the other's work as a critic was done. Swinnerton acknowledged to his Cornwall-based correspondent – ten-times published but still struggling to break through – that he wasn't aware of his name and hadn't read any of his books. That all changed in short order; nonetheless, WG's fastidious sensitivity saw him emerge from the liaison with honour intact. That the same can't definitively be said regarding his association with Church is in no way to impugn or malign either man – but it *is* a pity all the same.

Of course, for as long as the author continues to cut the mustard, the impinging of friendship's obligation upon integrity and impartiality will not be an issue, leaving the critic free to pronounce with candour, conscience clear. What happens, though, when the reviewer's pal turns in a stinker? Where will his loyalties lie then?

Fortunately for all concerned, by remaining sure-footedly on his game, midcareer WG obviated any such question. The first of his novels to be reviewed by Church seems to have been *The Sleeping Partner* (1956), of which the critic wrote:

*Mr. Graham is no less skilled [than Eric Ambler] in realistic narrative. But he goes more closely to the personal exploration of motive and character. His tale is also told in the first person ... [Synopsis of plot] ... What happens after that I found quite terrifying. I shared the desperate peril in which this husband plunged himself as a result of his delayed hysteria after the climax. He was so obviously walking towards his doom, a fate quite undeserved. For Mr. Graham's book is, after all, a study in gentleness, with strong moral values quietly emphasised by a sense of nobility that pervades the book ...*⁸

and, of 1959's *The Tumbled House*:

*He is one of those rare practitioners in the art of fiction who really does treat it as an art ... His new novel, I think, is his best.*⁹

Concerning correspondence, though nothing from Church to WG appears to have survived, fifteen letters or notes from WG to Church are held by the Universities of Texas at Austin (9) and Manchester (6). The earliest, dated 3 January 1957, is a short, handwritten note congratulating Church – *Well done, R.C., and well done literature* – on his receipt of a CBE.¹⁰ The next, dated 22 April 1961, thanks "my dear Richard" for taking "the trouble to write a personal letter about *Marnie*." We learn that Church found the book "arresting". WG confides:

*I too was worried about Marnie [his character]; but I refused the advice of my publisher and my agent, both of whom wanted me to soften the ending; and on the rightness of that I have no second thoughts. A psychiatrist who read the book in typescript said among other things: 'She'll be all right,' and from that I took a sort of comfort. He suggested that in these fairly enlightened days she might get off without even a prison sentence; but of that I have my doubts.*¹¹

In March 1963, Church reviewed the Bodley Head re-issue of WG's 1949 novel *Cordelia*:

*Winston Graham ... has a strong sense of dramatic tension, and some of his tales are almost unbearably exciting when he lets this element take command, as in his last two books, Marnie and The Tumbled House. Now he turns to the historic past. [Synopsis of plot.] All this would be a conventional story but for the quality of the treatment, and the wealth of minor characters and the dramatic situations that come crowding in to propel the tale along in the manner of Alexander Dumas. The people too have a vitality, with quirks of conduct and character to make them both dear and memorable to the reader. This period piece will add to the consideration that now begins to be given to Mr. Graham's work.*¹²

On 23 March 1963 WG wrote from the Savile Club to thank Church for his "charming" review, for which WG was "most grateful".¹³

The Book Society's December 1963 choice was WG's *The Grove of Eagles* and the man they chose to review the novel on their behalf was Richard Church¹⁴ who said, among much else:

Whatever his theme, or the period chosen for his tales, [Winston Graham] presents them through a narrative that moves through a progressive rhythm, the pace varying with the tension of scene, conflict, and suspense, while on this flood the characters pass in procession, their gestures in keeping with their individuality, their actions convincingly expressive of their principles or emotions ... Drake, Raleigh, Howard, Essex and the rest. All these figures are evoked in Mr. Graham's tale. We meet also Francis Bacon, and even have a fleeting glance at Cervantes during one of the scenes at the Spanish Court.

It is an opulent picture, with all the gold and glitter of the Renaissance world. But we are also shown the squalor, the cruelty, the superstition, and the dreadful uncertainties that combined to set the tone of melancholy and even of despair in the poetry of the period, especially that of Shakespeare,

Marlowe and Spenser. Mr. Graham's book is also of that mood. Uncertainty of personal fate, wild hopes and violent reactions, mark the goings-on of these Elizabethan characters, in an age when as one of the Queen's courtiers says, "Brother is against brother, friend against friend. It is little for the son of a slain man to become the ardent supporter of the murderer, for husbands and wives to bear witness that will see the other to the block. There are only two motives which reign undisputed, advancement and survival." The ... story is highly woven, thread upon thread adding to the tapestry its element of gold, or sable tinge. The hero takes part in the expedition by which Essex sacked Cadiz. The account of this is detailed and masterly. But the book is more than picturesque. It is rich in moral force and sane historical judgment. [Its] inner meaning and purpose ... may be found in a passage toward the end: "It is when human beings are above human logic that they perhaps show their affinity with God". The whole movement of this long and elaborate story is conditioned by that belief. For pure story-telling, The Grove of Eagles may be classed with The Count of Monte Cristo; for romantic warmth, with Lorna Doone. In addition, it has, along with all of Mr. Graham's tales, a balance of shrewd assessment of human nature, its subterfuges, its pleas, and its gradual discovery of virtue in the most unexpected of characters.¹⁵

After reading a carbon copy of Church's draft review, WG wrote an undated letter praising Church's "glittering and influential notice":

... only a distinguished novelist ... could have written his appreciation with such insight and such breadth of judgment ... Thank you very much.¹⁶

He then responds to a comment of Church's concerning [influential academic and literary critic F.R.] "Leavis and the 'educated' young":

When I first began writing I remember with great appreciation one or two books that Leavis wrote ... but in the last

*twenty years I have become a bitter opponent of his, and all the narrow, pseudo-superior exclusiveness that he and his disciples have thrust upon the literary world ... His apostles proliferate everywhere, often at second and third remove from the 'master', and the more second and third hand their judgments the more intolerant and intolerable they become.*¹⁷

WG's next letter to Church, dated 11 April 1965, notes his concern on reading an article in *The Times*, penned by Church, disclosing that the elder man has been "confined for a long period" by illness. "In spite of what you say," writes WG, "I find it dreary to be indoors for long." He then suggests a lunch at Buxted with "Frank S"[winnerton] in "a couple of months" time.¹⁸

Some three months later, Church published another enthusiastic review, this time of WG's then latest novel *After the Act*:

*It is good to see at last that Winston Graham is receiving his due as a literary artist ... The author has a faculty for incisive, sparse presentation of character in conflict with temptation, and he does it in recognisable dialogue and circumstances that make the reader think: "There, but for the grace of God, go I." It is a disturbing faculty, with a moral authority behind it. What a theatre critic in the books says to the playwright narrator may have a slight reference to Mr. Graham himself, as an explanation of this faculty in action throughout his novels. "Fundamentally, you're the serious type – over-serious maybe; you take things too much to heart. But because of some curious quirk in your nature, what you put down on paper has a wry, off-beat twist to it, so that people look on it as the most advanced satire." But it also means that Mr. Graham's novels are based in spiritual honesty.*¹⁹

Once again this draws a warm (undated) letter of appreciation from WG:

... although I am not like [the book's murdering playwright protagonist] Morris Scott – happily – the literary ectoplasm that stretches between him and me is probably shorter, his

*profession being what it is, than in most of the characters I create ...*²⁰

WG's next two letters, both undated, appear to have been written one day apart in 1965: in the first, he expresses his "shock" and concern at learning, upon his return from "some weeks" in Sicily with Jean, of the "grave illness" of Church's second wife Katia and via the second he sends "our deepest love and sympathy" regarding "the tragedy [presumably Katia's death] that has overtaken you both." He goes on:

*I have struggled all my life to keep in existence a view of a benign element in the universe: as I grow older, this is more constantly attacked, not so much by the larger disasters as by the relatively small personal tragedies which are major in their effect on loving hearts.*²¹

In a note written at the Savile Club on 21 December 1966, WG expresses, along with "our love and good wishes", his delight that Church has "resumed reviewing ... it is good to know you are with us again."²² Then, on New Year's Day 1967 he wrote again:

My dear Richard

I was so glad to have your letter and so very pleased that you had found someone to share your life: it's too precious to be squandered, yet without some true companionship and affection it has too little purpose from day to day to make it worth while. We send our love and sincere wishes that all will be well with you both for many years to come.

He then goes on to lament that the forthcoming wedding of his daughter Rosamund to her American fiancé, though "a very nice chap ... heralds to some extent the break-up of our quartet in a way an English marriage would not."²³

In June 1967, Church offered his appraisal of *The Walking Stick*:

A rough method for judging the quality of a novelist is to ask oneself if he is capable of putting the reader into close

contact with what has the appearance of pure fact; actualities, both of character and event. The 'stream of consciousness' school has interfered with that criterion, but it survives all superior criticism, and today is regaining its ascendancy. The Count of Monte Cristo returns to favour, if indeed it has ever been superseded by the wholly different works of Flaubert and Proust. Winston Graham is a novelist to benefit by this recurrence of an interest in pure storytelling, a function, and a duty, for some time out of fashion. He is a master of it, in the same class as R. C. Hutchinson and Graham Greene. He goes from one theme to another, book by book, and explores it with a relentless closeness of touch, realistic in every aspect of that exploration, creating facts without the interference of commentary, or longueurs of generalisation or philosophy.

He is not ashamed to approximate, in his plots, to the thriller, and always there is a kind of nervous apprehension in his literary make-up which drives him to scenes of violence, of extravagant emotional enterprise, which the reader discovers, after reviving from his own sense of terror, to be fully justified by events and by the nature of the characters involved. The themes are always original because of the choice of the central figure or narrator. In ... The Walking Stick ... all is handled with superb skill, and this tale adds to Mr. Graham's reputation.²⁴

In a letter dated 27 June 1967, WG responded:

My dear Richard,

I always think myself extremely lucky if I get a book out during one of the periods when you are back on regular reviewing, because you bring to your notices such generosity and such perception of an author's true motives and – one hopes – true worth, that he always feels – and perhaps is – a better writer for having these things said about him. You are a kind man, and a wise one; thank you.²⁵

Though Church replied to this letter two days later, WG did not write again until 18 December due to his preoccupation through the latter part of the year with his wife's precarious health, though he did remember when writing to express his delight at news of Church's remarriage: "It is not good to be alone, and it will have been a great blessing that you had a good and kind friend to help you to try to reorientate your life."²⁶

Other than two inconsequential, partially dated notes (from 9 October, probably 1964²⁷ and from 14 January, probably 1969,²⁸ the first confirming a lunch date and giving directions to his home and the second passing on thanks for a Sunday lunch), there is just one more letter from WG to Church, once again written in response to an emphatically positive book review – in fact Church's last of a WG novel (this time *Angell, Pearl and Little God*) before his sudden death in March 1972:

Winston Graham is a novelist whose reputation grows steadily with every new book, because of his fidelity to the realistic technique on which he has founded his artistry ... I wonder if he has a photographic memory ... or does he carry a notebook? ... Whatever (his) method, here is storytelling that is powerful and professional in its architecture: so much so, that the reviewer hesitates to offer a synopsis for fear of spoiling the pattern by over-emphasising one or other incidents, and prematurely exploding crises on which so much has turned, and has yet to turn again ... (Though) many writers of thrillers are skilled enough (in fictional mechanics), Mr. Graham has added to that expertise, as his interest in, and knowledge of, human beings as individuals deepens. I notice that book by book he tends to become almost painfully responsible for one or more of his characters, seeking to do justice to the person whose career is in his hands. But nowadays his purpose is to pass that responsibility to the person involved, and to move into the background himself, so that no suspicion of mechanical manipulation by the author can be fastened on him. This puts him into a major category as a novelist ... What subtle analysis of character Mr. Graham works into [Angell, Pearl and Little God], with minor figures, and above all, the

evolution of the self-centred dilettante, mean and gluttonous, as he awakens to love for another person than himself, to be plunged into situations that might, in less masterly hands, be mere melodrama. Mr. Graham makes of them a catalytic agent, to precipitate the true character of Angell. I will not divulge what it is. I need only add praise for the clarity of prose style; its economy in descriptive writing, and its elasticity in the presentation of dialogue.²⁹

Just a day after the publication of these lines, WG wrote:

My dear Richard,

What a lovely review. Thank you so very much – once again. Your notices of my books, by their thoughtfulness, by their appreciation, and by their depth of insight, seem to make me grow in stature while I read them! Bless you.

It is of course easy to appreciate the appreciator; yet I wonder if there is anyone else writing in England today who has the (apparent) leisure, the breadth of knowledge and the wide understanding of literary aims that you have and can so express themselves. Also I wonder if even you realise what value this sort of thing is to the (still) self doubting writer, not merely because it helps him to think better of the book he has done but because it helps to solidify and stimulate his aims for the future. In this way criticism is genuinely creative.

As a matter of interest, I never ever carry a notebook – though when I come to the task of writing I almost always wish I had! When it comes to the business of writing dialogue which is not the kind I would speak myself I sweat endlessly, usually over-writing to begin, then cutting almost all the evocative or peculiar words out, then at a third attempt reinserting some of them, so that eventually it seems to read and sound right: a sort of tuning in process. And I suppose this sort of thing happens to some extent also in choosing incident and detail.³⁰

In all of this – in some part because of missing letters, but for the most part because even a full two-sided set would but hint at the fast-fading impression of a long, warm and very real human friendship – lurks a tantalising sense of the enduring bond between two of literature's most loyal servants, not to say unsung heroes (of which there are very many). Though the books of both men won prizes in their time,³¹ Church is now little read and WG known mostly for his association with Mammoth Screen's dumbed down, style-over-substance *Poldark*. But the faith they kept, and the gifts they left, endure.

NOTES AND SOURCES

¹ The pastel and pencil image by William Shackleton on page one above dates from December 1923, when Church would have been 30.

² *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* were two French magazines published by Messrs Hachette, who sponsored a prize worth 1000 francs (circa £40) awarded in France from 1904 and, from 1919, in England also. The intention of the latter was "to reward a strong and original piece of work, excellent in matter and in style, promising for the future, and calculated to reveal to French readers the true spirit and character of England" and its aim to encourage writers who were felt to be insufficiently known or appreciated. Previous winners included E M Forster's *A Passage to India* in 1925, *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf in 1928 and *Cold Comfort Farm* by Stella Gibbons in 1934.

³ Novelist Howard Spring declared the book "the loveliest autobiography written in our time."

⁴ Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire; a more prestigious honour than the OBE conferred on WG in 1983.

⁵ Page 148 of FRANK SWINNERTON: THE LIFE AND WORKS OF A BOOKMAN by Irene Campbell, The University of Warwick, 1992

⁶ The letter, from Swinnerton to Morchard Bishop, is held by the Cambridge University Library Department of Manuscripts and University Archives.

⁷ Letter from WG to Swinnerton dated 17 January 1942 but written (presumably on 17 January) in 1943

⁸ *Country Life*, 2 August 1956

⁹ *Evening Standard*, date unknown

Elizabeth Bowen (*The Tatler*) and
Richard Church (*Country Life*)
*are among the thousands who are
buying and recommending :—*

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^{10, 13, 16-18, 20, 22, 23} Letter among the Richard Church Papers held by the University of Texas at Austin's Harry Ransom Center

^{11, 25-28} Letter among the Richard Church Papers held by the University of Manchester's John Rylands Library

¹² *Country Life*, 14 March 1963

¹⁴ Letter dated 19 September 1963 from The Book Society's Diana Kingdom to Richard Church; as 10

¹⁵ Full draft review held as 10. A possibly somewhat revised or edited version was published in *Country Life* on 2 January 1964 and possibly also in *The Book Society News*.

¹⁹ *Country Life*, 29 July 1965

²¹ As 10. Passages such as this from WG (outside his books) are rare. For another, see the letter dated 17 August 1958 to Victor Gollancz, held in the University of Warwick's Gollancz archive. After receiving a copy of the other's *From Darkness to Light: a Confession of Faith in the Form of an Anthology*, he wrote:

I am delighted to have it because, for some obscure reason, I have gone on buying copies of A Year of Grace [also by Gollancz] and giving them away, and yet have never read

the companion volume. If it gives me half the enlightenment and inspiration of the first book (I don't mean inspiration in the mundane novelist's sense) it will be a great pleasure to read. I think this is probable, because already on page 20 I see in your Letter to Timothy views on the Incarnation which seem to me to be what I have felt for a long time but never seen expressed before. (I am not the deeply religious person you are, but what religion I have seems to exist at a deeper level than the dogmas one hears so endlessly and unimagatively repeated.)

²⁴ *Country Life*, 1 June 1967

²⁹ *Country Life*, 5 February 1970

³⁰ Letter dated 6 February 1970; as 11

³¹ Re Church, see page one, paragraph one; as for WG, in 1955 the Crime Writers' Association's inaugural Crossed Red Herrings Award for best crime novel of the year went to him for *The Little Walls*.

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