Of Commerce and Conscience

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***Penguin Portrait: Allen Lane and the Penguin Editors 1935-1970, ed.* Steve Hare, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995, pp. 368. £12.00.**

Launched by Allen Lane in July 1935, while he was working in relative obscurity for the Bodley Head, at what appears to have been, financially and politically, a most discouraging time for publishing, Penguin Books has not looked back since then. It has survived difficulties and controversies of various kinds, including the trial following the publication of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterlay's Lover*. Steve Hare's volume is a welcome celebration of Penguin's sixty years of success. Without ignoring "the shortcomings, mistakes, squabbles and fights, small acts of cruelty and even stupidity in the course of its development", it conveys a panoramic sense of Penguin's growing up. Whether it weights correctly all aspects of Penguin's achievements (its coverage, for instance, of the Pelican History series is minimal) must be judged by publishing historians.

Penguin, which started as a paperback publisher of reprints, in time extended both the range and quality of its publications in a phenomenal way. So there can be no two opinions about the premise on which Hare builds the history of Penguin Books: "It is... so tied up with the events of two-thirds of this century that it is impossible at times to tell whether those events are shaping Penguin or vice versa." In 1960 *The Sunday Times* described Penguin "as a national institution". This sounds parochial, compared with an Indian newspaper's acknowledgment, during his long tour of India just prior to the outbreak of war, that Allen Lane was "known to the world at large as the creator of the Poor Man's University". The view that it needs the combination of the man, the moment and the milieu for the creation of a great work of art is perhaps equally applicable to the birth of a publishing house such as Penguin.

However, Hare's approach is different from that of two previous eminently readable accounts, viz., *Allen Lane: A Personal Portrait* by W. E. Williams (1973) and *Allen Lane: King Penguin* by J. E. Morpurgo (1979). Since both Williams (also known as Pelican Williams) and Morpurgo were members of the founding team of editors with whom Allen Lane launched his publishing gamble, they effectively brought to their accounts the personal and professional insights of an insider.

Hare is an outsider who became an interested party because, as he puts it disarmingly, like anyone else's, "They [Penguin Books] shaped my development and litter my life".

What Hare attempts to focus on is different. Both Williams and Morpurgo portray the history of Penguin Books largely in terms of the dynamic personality of Lane himself. Hare does not lose sight of Lane's extraordinary combination of "commerce and conscience", "missionary and mercenary ideals", but chooses to explore the evolution of Penguin as an institution. His *Penguin Portrait* is structured as a series of Acts, scenes, and vignettes. Through judiciously selected extracts from letters, internal memoranda, published and unpublished reminiscences, articles from newspapers he evokes both the intensity of policy-making and the excitement of its active application. Hare seems to have conceived it as an unfolding of a drama, and his main cast of people "who are as near as I get to having heroes" are: Eunice Frost, Alan Glover, Nikolaus Pevsner, E. V. Rieu, Noel Carrington, Eleanor Graham, John Lehmann, Tony Godwin...". That Allen Lane should appear to blend well into this cast of "principal players", major and minor characters is part of Hare's design. In short, his *Penguin Portrait* is a biography of "Penguin's editorial development" rather than a biography of the "King Penguin" who set it into motion.

Yet, if Allen Lane conceived the Penguin and his team of close associates delivered it, arguably, it was war-time which nurtured it and sustained it in its infancy. Williams, who held a unique position of influence as Director of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, proved to be an ideal publishing midwife. Among other things, he successfully worked out the scheme of Forces Book Club in collaboration with the War Office of supplying Penguin books; this had the additional advantage of gaining increased quota of paper at a time when other publishers had to make do with a limited supply of paper. Allen Lane clearly saw his role as that of educating and entertaining his readers. So he refused to compromise on several issues in the interest of gaining increased profits since for him "a book is not a tin of beans". He studiously avoided covers in colour with what he called "a little more of breast and bottom" and vigorously defended his policy against the criticism of "having missed the bus over the war books". It was not until the 1960's that he agreed to adapt to the changing trends in publishing.

However, even within his self-imposed limits, his pragmatic acumen was exemplary. His dismissive phrase "Parrot Books" for publishers

allegedly guided by profiteering became the title of a new Penguin series. The drawing (reproduced on page 117) of a British soldier thrusting a bayonet into the backside of a frightened German soldier with Hitler's little black moustache is captioned "Write and tell them with a Penguin Pen". It speaks volumes for the inspiration behind the setting up of the Penguin Prisoner of War Book Service. However, as Orwell too acknowledged in his war-broadcasts, the war-time use of Penguins extended to the civilians also. People stuck in the Tube shelters for hours together and the numerous army men in lonely camps shared a special need to be entertained. This generated a kind of code whereby, as Richard Hoggart reminisces, "a Penguin or Pelican sticking out of the back trouser pocket of a battledress" singled out the soldier, sailor or airman as one of the different ones." One wonders what the literary and cultural landscape in England and world-wide would have been like if Penguin Books had been launched, and the penguinization of the tastes of the reading public, begun in 1915 instead of 1935.

One of the most memorable, if controversial, accounts of the Great War is Graves's *Goodbye to All That* published in 1929. But its interest goes beyond the vivid details of trench-fighting because it also engages with the profound emotional and literary consequences of the trauma of war. However, it was not until 24 March, 1960 that its third English revised edition was published by Penguin in 40,000 copies. It is intriguing that it did not enter the Penguin list earlier, even though Penguin had run the second English edition of *I, Claudius* in 55,000 copies in July 1941. Hare's book provides no answer to such questions, nor does it explain why he chose, valuable as it is, to focus only on *The Golden Ass*. It may be because the translation was a first edition commission, but so were two other Latin texts, and *Poems Selected by Himself*.

To be fair, Hare did not set out to explore the relationship between Graves and Penguin Books in a special way, or for that matter between Penguin Books and any other author. Yet readers of Graves are apt to expect more information, since fourteen of Graves's books have appeared under the Penguin imprint. These include the second English editions of novels *I, Claudius, Claudius the God, Antigua, Penny, Puce, Sergeant Lamb of the Ninth, Wife to Mr. Milton, Count Belisarius,* as well as of *The Crowning Privilege*. In addition, we have the first English editions of Graves's translations of Apuleius' *The Golden Ass,* Lucan's *Pharasalia*, Suetonius' *The Twelve Caesars*, of *Poems Selected by*

Himself, and of *The Greek Myths* in two volumes.

Graves figures twice among the *dramatis personae* invoked in *Penguin Portrait*. First, in 1941, Graves the author of *I, Claudius*, proposing that "a select bibliography" of his other works ought to appear in it because "Penguins are far more useful to an author as advertisement for his other works than as royalty earners". On the same page, he appears as a Latin scholar. Finding misprints, especially in the Latin verses, in the published edition of *I, Claudius*, Graves diplomatically forwards his reprimand through A. P. Watt: "I should have thought that somebody at the Penguin Pool would have been able to proofread Latin".

It might have rocked his relationship with Penguin Books had it not been for the arrival three years later of the meticulous Dr. E. V. Rieu as editor of the Penguin classics series. Hare reprints extracts from 14 letters exchanged between Rieu and Graves and from 4 exchanged between Lane and Graves. 16 of these letters concern the commissioning and publication of *The Golden Ass*. Apparently, Graves had suggested Caesar who, as it turned out, was "pretty high" on Rieu's list. But when he offered Caesar's *Conquest of Gaul* to Graves as "your own", the latter declined it, saying he had suggested Caesar "only as an example of an author who was not so dry as he seemed". "The possibilities I think most likely to appeal to you" which Rieu suggested/offered in his letter of 6 December, 1944 to Graves included Horace's *Satires and Epistles*, Herodotus (2 volumes) and Tacitus's *The Annals* (2 volumes). *The Golden Ass* was not on Rieu's list as he was to consider it only when the series had been established. In fact, it was Graves's suggestion that Rieu should "secure" it for him.

The relationship between Rieu and Graves was a meeting of like minds; something which one would expect in an ideal relationship between an author and his editor. Both were concerned with the need to render classical texts into contemporary English and they shared enthusiasm for certain authors, including Homer, which is highlighted in *Penguin Portrait*. Rieu's admirable translation of *The Odyssey* was the first of Penguin Classics to be published. Graves's translation entitled *The Anger of Achilles: Homer's Illiad* was published in 1959. And *Homer's Daughter*, his fictionalization of *The Odyssey*, which appeared in 1955, belongs, like *The Golden Ass*, to the period when Graves's imagination was seized by the centrality of the myth of the White Goddess. In fact, though Hare's extracts do not refer to it, Graves often interrupted (temporally rather than mentally) his work on *The*

Golden Ass to finalize his MS of *The White Goddess* for Faber.

Citing Alexandrian's view that Homer was indebted to an Egyptian-Greek poetess named Phantasia for most of *The Odyssey*, Graves confidently detects in it "the hand of a predecessor of Aphra Behn, Anita Loos, Amanda Ros and who was it wrote *Gone With the Wind*?" To Rieu, however, Homer seemed "to have the bisexual prerogative of supreme genius".

For the author of "Down, Wanton, Down!", an uninhibited and robust paean to his member, the choice of *The Golden Ass* was easy but the decision to publish it was risky for Penguin Books ten years before they ran into trouble with *Lady Chatterlay's Lover*. Certainly, caution was on Graves's mind too when he asked Rieu about the Penguin policy about Classical obscenity. Rieu suggested that Graves might have to "bowdlerize a bit more than our Elizabethan friend [Adlington]" as "The 'Pasiphae' passage in Book X is a bit of a pill". Graves's following reply shows that he often worked on several projects simultaneously and that these, like *The Golden Ass*, Homer, and *King Jesus*, for example, were offshoots of a larger preoccupation which had a more direct bearing on his poetry:

> You need not worry about readers for the Ass! (You'll sell 200,000 copies.) What you call the Pasiphae bit is most interesting to me as anti-Christian mockery: apparently Jesus was secretly worshipped as an ass-god by some of his near-Eastern devotees, and the graffiti which are generally regarded as libels are nothing of the sort. They even found an ass-crucifix at Rome. It all develops from the text of Isaiah XXXII 20 which is Messianic.

The exchanges between Lane and Graves, on the other hand, tell us why in the end Lane decided that no bowdlerization was necessary and that he was prepared to delete the usual libel and obscenity clause from the contract. Hare's profile does not tell us (the 1966 edition of Higginson's Bibliography does not give a figure either!) how close Penguin Books ever came to selling "200,000" copies of *The Golden Ass*, but it informs us that a year after the paperback edition appeared they brought out a de luxe hardback edition of 2000 numbered and signed copies. However, Higginson tells us that there was also an earlier hardback issue in two printings in 1950, though the number of copies is unknown. It sold well, despite being seized by Australian Customs and being banned in Ireland. In any case, Graves's latest financial pressure had been "relieved", as Amy Graves reported to John Graves, "by the enthusiastic reception by the Penguin book people to his trans-

lation of *The Golden Ass*" (Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess, 1940-1985*, London, 1995, p. 147). Martin Seymour-Smith corroborates this, while seeming to disagree about the speed at which the cash flowed in: the three translations from the Latin Graves did for Penguin "brought in excellent royalties over a very long period of timeæthough little immediate cash" (*Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London, rev. edn. 1995, p. 415). Seymour-Smith also remarks that "He [Graves] loved doing *The Golden Ass*, enjoyed the Suetonius, and hated the Lucan". One wonders if there were any exchanges between Graves and Penguin Books which would throw light on the number of copies sold and on the varying degrees of Graves's involvement in his translations.

Graves's second appearance among the *dramatis personae* of Hare's *Portrait* is when Penguin invited him to join the defence at the trial of *Lady Chatterlay's Lover*. Graves's ambivalent reply is characteristic, and reminiscent of his reply to Eliot's plea for supporting the case of Pound in 1946. While he did not think the novel to be "pornographic", he disliked D. H. Lawrence for "some antipathetic element". He could not reconcile his dislike of the novelist with the defence cause with which he sympathised, also because he felt he owed gratitude to Lane. However, he was clear on the charge of obscenity and supported the defence in a left-handed way:

> I'm sorry because I owe a lot to Allen Lane and I think it's ridiculous that he should have to publish an incomplete series of Lawrence's works just because *Lady Chatterlay* contains words like f**k which have been approved in *The Mint* (by his namesake) and a thousand other books of less merit, and descriptions of the sexual act, such as occur in most modern novels; also in my translation of Apuleius, *Golden Ass*.
>
> Thus far you may quote me, if it's any use.

The profile of Graves as a man and writer which emerges in a compressed way from less than 11 pages devoted to his correspondence in *Penguin Portrait* is familiar and convincing. That seven of his books – the two Claudius novels, *Count Belisarius*, *Goodbye to All That*, *Collected Short Stories*, *The Greek Myths*, and *Poems Selected By Himself* in a revised incarnation as *Selected Poems* (ed. Paul O'Prey)æare on the current Penguin list is a sign that the relationship continues to be a solid one. There seems, potentially, more to Graves's relationship with

Penguin Books than what has been covered by Hare.

Graves worked in a variety of literary genres, and he had dealings with diverse publishers in Britain and the U. S. A. It would be interesting to know how he responded to those who for commercial, and sometimes, as in the case of T. S. Eliot and Faber, for literary reasons offered to disseminate these works. A collection / selection of his letters to his publishers, reviewers, etc. would offer possibilities of illuminating comparisons and contrasts. These would add to our understanding of the complex unity of Graves the man and writer for the energy of his wide-ranging prose, creative and discursive, his translations, and his works of mythology and religion was another manifestation of the inspiration which nourished his poetry tree.