



Cecil Woolf

Cecil James Sidney Woolf (1927-2019)

Jean Moorcroft Wilson

It is impossible to do justice to such a many-sided man as Cecil, who died at the age of 92 on 10 June 2019. But I shall try to give you at least a flavour of his long life and his many interests. Cecil was born in Waddesdon, Buckinghamshire on 20 February 1927 and grew up in the country there. And though he spent the greater part of his life in London, he remained a countryman at heart, even after he left home for boarding-school at the tender age of six, first the Dragon Prep School in Oxford, then Stowe. To be with him in the country was a revelation.

As his schooldays revealed, Cecil had an exceptional mind, not only taking the equivalent of A-levels a year early, for example, but also gaining top marks in the whole country in the English Literature paper. This was during the Second World War, however, and instead of going on to Oxford or Cambridge as expected, he enlisted in the Army at the age of sixteen. Entering as a private in the tank regiment, he was quickly promoted to the rank of captain, fighting in the tail-end of the War in Italy, where he promptly learnt to speak fluent Italian ('It's so like Latin', he would explain modestly) and Palestine. Italy, Venice in particular, became for him the 'great good place'.

After demobilisation in 1947, Cecil joined the stockbroking firm of Woolf, Christie, founded by two of his childless uncles, who wanted him to carry on the family business. Though he rapidly mastered the various branches of the trade, he left after only a few years to start his own antiquarian book business, willingly forfeiting the guaranteed money and security of his city job for the challenges and independence he anticipated as a freelance writer and bookseller. It was typical of him that, though his aunt, Virginia Woolf was becoming recognized as one of Britain's

greatest novelists by the nineteen-fifties and -sixties he never traded on his relationship to her and remained modest and unassuming throughout his life, almost to a fault.

Likewise, though he had grown up in a house built by Cardinal Wolsey on James de Rothschild's Waddesdon Estate and was related to Jimmy through James's wife, Dorothy, he never boasted of the fact or used it to his advantage. And he never tried for popular fame, though he was clever enough to do so; he preferred a less obvious route. As a writer, his bibliographies of Noman Douglas and Baron Corvo, together with his editions of Corvo's novels, short stories, poems and letters are models of their kind.

The same year that Cecil mounted a highly successful Corvo exhibition, 1960, he also founded his own publishing house, inspired undoubtedly by the example of his aunt and uncle, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, whom he had helped at the Hogarth Press from an early age. His encouragement of young, and not-so-young, writers, like Leonard's, became legendary. (Without Cecil's belief and encouragement, I doubt whether I, for instance, would have dared to have faith in myself as a writer.) A list of the books Cecil published in those early days shows how eclectic yet wide-ranging his tastes were and how creative and pro-active he was:

– When he got to know Colin Wilson in the old Reading Room of the British Museum shortly after the success of Wilson's *The Outsider* (1956), for example, he suggested that, young as he was, he should write his autobiography and Wilson's *Voyage to a Beginning* became one of Cecil Woolf Publishers early hits.¹

– And he nursed Quentin Crisp with endless crates of Guinness through the conceiving and writing of the book which followed Crisp's *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968), i.e. *How to Have a Life Style* another bestseller which went into at least four editions and became a one-man show.²

– There were also more scholarly books, such as 'William Morris', Joyce Tompkins's masterly 'approach to Morris's poetry',³ or Harold Brook's 'T.S. Eliot as Literary Critic',⁴ or an edition of J.M. Barrie's unpublished play, 'Ibsen's Ghost',⁵ as well

as biographies of Isaac Rosenberg and Charles Hamilton Sorley and editions of their poetry and letters.⁶

– His own edition of Corvo's *Venice Letters* was one of the Press's greatest successes of this period.⁷

As if that weren't enough to keep anyone busy, shortly after we moved in together in the 1970s, our first child, Katie, was born and Cecil became (as the children often called us), 'Mummy/Daddy'. (His greatest boast was that he had changed more nappies than I had!)

Cecil had wanted to call Katie 'Virginia' when she was born – I thought that 'Virginia Woolf' might be something of a burden for a child and it eventually became her second name – but his attitude towards his illustrious aunt and uncle was not entirely straightforward. (He spent our first dinner together telling me how much better D. H. Lawrence was as a novelist than Virginia.) But he was evidently proud of the connection at some level and would later publish one of our most successful series in the Press, the *Bloomsbury Heritage* monographs about the life, work and times of the Bloomsbury Group, Virginia in particular.

Our second child, Philip, was born two years after Katie, while I was working on a biography of Isaac Rosenberg. Cecil had a great admiration for that First World War poet, whose sister, Annie Wynick he had got to know. Like her, he thought Rosenberg shamefully neglected and had promised her that he would publish a biography of her brother. When the author he had commissioned to write it, with his help, took the completed book to a larger publisher, I was so upset for him that I rashly offered to write one for Cecil Woolf Publishers instead. It was the start of my career as a War Poets' biographer, though I didn't know it. It was also the origin of our series on the subject.

Though Cecil came to fatherhood relatively late, he did nothing by halves and an early fiftieth birthday present was our third child, Emma, born two years after Philip.

A third *publishing* child, a little later, would be a third series of monographs, this time on the Powys brothers, with the main focus

on John Cowper Powys and editions of some of his letters. As one of the authors and editors of the Powys books, Anthony Head wrote in the Powys Newsletter shortly after Cecil died:

His passing marks the end of a period of publishing in this field that is unlikely ever to be equalled. The Powys Society owes Cecil an enormous debt of gratitude. From the time he began to publish volumes of JCP's letters in the early 1980s, his interest never wavered and where large publishers would steer well clear of them, Cecil was willing to commit the effort and money to publishing letters, diaries, essays, monographs and all sorts, despite their limited popular appeal and the near certainty of financial loss. No other publisher has done more over such a span of time to maintain the profile of the Powyses and encourage interest in them.⁸

The start of the Powys Society Series was sandwiched between our last two children, Alice and Tristram.

The 1980s revealed a quite different side to Cecil, his interest in politics, which resulted in *The Men and Document Series*. When I first met Cecil, he had been co-editing a book for Cape called *Authors Take Sides on Vietnam*, for which, incidentally, he had successfully solicited his uncle Leonard's contribution.⁹ It was in part Leonard's own involvement in politics which had influenced Cecil, as well as his friendship as a young man with the writer Nancy Cunard, who had edited *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* in 1937 (to which Leonard also contributed, but not, alas, Graves): a book we re-issued in our own list later.

When the Falklands War broke out in 1982, Cecil asked me if I would edit an *Authors Take Sides on the Falklands* with him. I agreed; well aware of Cecil's leisurely view of time, however, it was with the proviso that we got it out quickly. (In the event, after an astoundingly large order from W. H. Smith's if we could have it ready in another fortnight, we managed it in three weeks from the

completed manuscript to bound copies!) *Authors Take Sides on Iraq and the Gulf War* would follow,¹⁰ and Cecil was working on a projected *Authors Take Sides on Syria* when he died. As Lois Gilmore argues in a paper delivered to the Virginia Woolf Society just days before Cecil's death, *Authors Take Sides* is a significant series, showing how 'a small press claims a neutral space; provides a forum for multiple voices to express opinions about war, peace, and social justice'.

As a direct result of *Authors Take Sides on the Falklands* one of the contributors,¹¹ the labour politician Tam Dalyell, asked if he could write his own book on the subject and this resulted in three more books in the *Men and Documents* series, Tam's *One Man's Falklands*, *Thatcher's Torpedo*, and *Thatcher: Patterns of Deceit*.¹² The Falklands conflict also spawned three more in the *Men and Documents* series: *The Sinking of the Belgrano* by Diana Gould, *The Death of a Rose-Grower: Who Killed Hilda Morrell* by Graham Smith, and *The Ponting Affair* by Richard Norton-Taylor, about the civil servant Clive Ponting, who had leaked documents on the war to the press.¹³

The last decade of Cecil's life was occupied mostly with his work on the Bloomsbury Heritage and War Poets series and he was delighted to be made an honorary member of both the Robert Graves, as well as the Virginia Woolf societies, in recognition of his efforts. Another unexpected pleasure was a return to a writer he had admired so greatly as a young man, Norman Douglas. He was thrilled to be invited to participate in the *Norman Douglas Symposium* in Bregenz, Austria, every two years until his death.

There are so many other sides to Cecil, so much more to say, but no more time to say it. I am reminded of a scene from Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, in which Thomas Cromwell the great statesman, politician and shrewd businessman, is shown at home with the wife and children he adores. He has just devised some wondrous fairy-wings for the younger of his two daughters, Grace:

The year that Grace was an angel she had wings made of peacock feathers. He himself had contrived it. The other little girls were dowdy goose creatures and their wings fell off if they caught them on the corners of the stable. But Grace stood glittering, her hair entwined with silver threads; her shoulders were trussed with a spreading, shivering glory, and the rustling air was perfumed as she breathed. Lizzie [Cromwell's wife] said, 'Thomas, there's no end to you is there?'

The same, I believe, could be said of Cecil.

Jean Moorcroft Wilson is the author of numerous biographies, including *Siegfried Sassoon: Soldier, Poet Lover, Friend* (2014), *Edward Thomas: from Adlestrop to Arras* (2015), and *Robert Graves: From Great War Poet to Good-bye to All That* (2018).

NOTES

¹ Colin Wilson, *Voyage to a Beginning: An Autobiography* (London: Cecil and Amelia Woolf, 1969).

² Quentin Crisp, *How to Have a Life Style* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1975).

³ J. M. S. Tomkins, *William Morris: An Approach to Poetry* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1988).

⁴ Harold Fletcher Brooks, *T.S. Eliot as Literary Critic* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1987).

⁵ E. M. Barrie, *Ibsen's Ghost: A Play in One Act* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1975).

⁶ Isaac Rosenberg, *The Selected Poems of Isaac Rosenberg*, ed and with an introduction by Jean Moorcroft Wilson (London: Cecil Woolf, 2003); Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Charles Hamilton Sorley: A Biography* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1985).

⁷ Frederick Rolfe, *The Venice Letters*, ed and with an introduction by Cecil Woolf (London: Cecil & Amelia Woolf, 1974).

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- ⁸ Anthony Head, 'Cecil Woolf, 20 February 1927-10 June 2019', *Powys Society Newsletter* 97 (July 2019), p. 2. <<https://www.powys-society.org/1PDF/NL97contents.pdf>> [accessed 28 June 2020]
- ⁹ *Authors Take Sides on Vietnam: Two Questions on the War in Vietnam Answered by the Authors of Several Nations*, ed by Cecil Woolf and John Bagguley (London: Owen, 1967).
- ¹⁰ *Authors Take Sides on Iraq and the Gulf War*, ed by Jean Moorcroft Wilson and Cecil Woolf (London: Cecil Woolf, 2004).
- ¹¹ *Authors Take Sides on the Falklands*, ed by Jean Moorcroft Wilson and Cecil Woolf (London: Cecil Woolf, 1982).
- ¹² Tam Dalyell, *One Man's Falklands* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1982); Tam Dalyell, *Thatcher's Torpedo: The Sinking of the Belgrano* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1983); Tay Dalyell, *Patterns of Deceit*, intro by Paul Rogers. (London: Cecil Woolf, 1986).
- ¹³ Diana Gould, *On the Spot: The Sinking of the 'Belgrano'*, intro. By Tam Dalyell (London: Cecil Woolf, 1984); Graham Smith, *Death of a Rose-Grower: Who Killed Hilda Murell?* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1985); Richard Norton-Taylor, *The Ponting Affair* (London: Cecil Woolf, 1985).