

Piers Paul Read extract from *Poet, Knight, Anarchist* for tomorrowbooks.

When my father, Herbert Read, died in 1968 my mother had inscribed on his grave stone the words ‘Poet, Knight, Anarchist’. The words reflected how she thought he would liked to be remembered rather than the reality of his reputation at the time. That came from his writings on art. He was ‘the apostle of modernism’ who had defended cubism, surrealism and abstraction against the scorn of his philistine fellow-countrymen. In his lifetime he wrote more than 50 books and countless essays, lectures, prefaces and reviews on anarchism, syndicalism, poetry, psychoanalysis, education, design but above all on modern art.

During my childhood in North Yorkshire in the 1950s, most of our neighbours in Yorkshire still thought that all modern art was tosh. If they respected my father, it was not for his reputation as a poet, art critic or anarchist theorist but for the decorations he had received for gallantry in World War I. They themselves liked to be addressed according to the rank they had held in the army unless, of course, there was a peerage or a baronetcy in the family: thus it was Captain Egerton, Major Tetley, Colonel Slingsby, Brigadier Heathcoat-Amory; but Sir William Worsley, Sir Martyn Beckett and Lord Feversham. A few called my father Captain Read when he returned to live in Yorkshire in 1948. When he was knighted ‘for services to literature’ in 1952 he became ‘Sir Herbert’ and my mother, of course, ‘Lady Read’.

The philistinism of our neighbours was a balm for my father who had come north precisely to escape the ‘culture vultures’ in London. Having promoted so successfully modern painters and sculptors such as Ben

Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore, he had become the prey of every charlatan who sought his endorsement for their work. He was also a publisher – a director of Routledge & Kegan Paul – and aspiring writers joined the artists clamouring at his door. His sense of mission made him incapable of leaving a letter unanswered or a manuscript unread. The same feeling of duty towards the cause of Art led him to accept almost any invitation to sit on a committee, deliver a lecture or write a review. Our house in Yorkshire was both a physical and a psychological refuge – a long way from London yet only two or three miles from the farm where he had spent the first ten years of his life – that ‘age of unearthly bliss,’ he wrote, ‘to which all the strands of my subsequent happiness are tied’.

The earliest emotion that I recall was embarrassment. My parents had brought to the genteel suburbs a number of their Bohemian ways. Though he set off for London on a weekday wearing a suit like any other commuter, my father at the weekend liked to wear a Basque beret. My mother wore eccentric hats and, to compensate for her small stature, would wear clogs with six-inch soles. Her manner in shops was also acutely embarrassing; she had none of the inhibitions that come naturally to the English and would show her anger if she felt thwarted or ignored. She had loud rows with tradesmen, shop keepers and bus conductors: the bus would take her into Beaconsfield where she taught music at High March School.

She made no bones about not being English and saw no need to conform to the values and conventions of the suburbs. She quarrelled with the Secretary of the Seer Green Golf Club when he complained that

Augustina let us make sandcastles in the bunkers. She had some friends and allies: she played in an amateur string quartet in Jordans and staged Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* in the grounds of a finishing school for young ladies. Sophie and I were forced to play the role of cupids wearing nothing but transparent muslin wings.

My father was often absent and played little part in our upbringing. He went up to London every week-day despite the Blitz to his office at Routledge & Kegan Paul close to St Paul's. He was not opposed to the war but was a pacifist: his chief contribution to the war effort, he told Henry Miller, was 'to walk the Buckinghamshire lanes under the stars to watch for a falling bomb'. I remember his gas mask and black tin helmet with the letter W for Warden painted on the front.

Even when at home, my father played a minimal role in our family life. Like Dickens' Mrs Jellybee, he was too concerned with the fate of humanity to spend much time with his bickering children. With the war came restrictions on liberty and, at the start of the war, he and George Orwell made contingency plans for a government clampdown on free speech. In early 1945 he became Chairman of the Freedom Defence Committee when four of his anarchist friends were charged with 'seducing from duty persons in the Forces' by publishing a poem which ended: 'The landlords have grabbed all the country/ Let them do the fighting, not you'. He attended their trial at the Old Bailey, close to his office in Carter Lane, as the correspondent of *Horizon*; and back at Broom House, shut away in his study, wrote *To Hell with Culture*, *The Philosophy of Anarchism*, *The Politics of the Unpolitical* and *The Education of Free Men*.

There were occasions when he emerged from his study to play the role of pater familias. One summer he drove us to Felixstowe for a seaside

holiday in the green Hillman convertible that had spent the war on blocks in the garage at Broom House. It had a loose exhaust that scraped against the road whenever we went up a hill. He hated sunbathing or building sandcastles but the holiday inspired a poem:

They came running over the perilous sands
Children with their golden eyes
Crying: *Look! We have found samphire*
Holding out their bone-ridden hands...

The children came running toward me
But I saw only the waves behind them
Cold, salt and disastrous,
Lift their black banners and break
Endlessly, without resurrection.

My older brother Tom, who we called Tim, was gentle and unassertive. He developed a squint – a symptom, I suspect, of the psychological shell-shock of our mother's rages. My sister Sophie matched my mother with a strong will and fiery temper. It is not by chance that the photographs in the family album taken after we had been given a tricycle show her riding it and me walking behind. She knew Tom's vulnerabilities, once making him weep by giving him a carefully embroidered triangle depicting a girl's private parts. Tim longed to be the son of a stockbroker, or a businessman like our Uncle Billy. He suffered horribly from my parents' eccentricity – sitting at his school prize-giving between a father wearing a beret and a mother wearing clogs.

My friends were all girls – Frank Morleys’ tomboy daughter Perry whose home was a short walk through the woods behind the house, and Patience Gibb who lived in the next house along Long Bottom Lane. One of my earliest memories was being found by my mother in the Gibbs’ garden on a warm afternoon examining Patience’s private parts. Like me she was then around four or five years old and, so far as I remember, was quite happy to be a party to my investigations; but I was sharply smacked by my mother, gripped by the arm and taken home. It was not unusual for my mother to fly into a fury for no apparent reason and so I was not especially surprised; but I had no idea what I had done wrong.

Every Sunday we went to mass in Beaconsfield. My father’s atheism had by now mellowed into agnosticism but he had agreed that his children should be baptised and raised as Roman Catholics. I was born in St Joseph’s nursing home in Beaconsfield and baptised in the parish church of St Teresa by Monsignor Smith, the same priest, I later discovered, who a few months earlier had given G.K. Chesterton the last rites. Godparents had been chosen from among his few Roman Catholic friends. Eric Gill was godfather to my brother Tom; Graham Greene to my sister Sophie; and the actor Robert Speaight to my brother Ben. My godfather was Alec Parker, the husband of my mother’s sister Fuzzy, a better Catholic than the others but severe, thin-lipped and hard up. However, Catholic devotions did not penetrate into Broom House nor were we sent to Catholic schools. We were taught to kneel by our beds each night to pray but there was no crucifix on the wall of the drawing room, no family prayers, no grace before meals.

Nor was I called by either of my Christian names – Piers, the Anglo-Saxon form of Peter, or Paul. Shortly before my birth, my brother Tom had

become attached to a cricket trapped behind the stove in the kitchen. At the moment of my birth its chirruping ceased. Tom had seen Walt Disney's film of *Pinocchio*, and so to console him my father told him that the cricket's soul had transmigrated into the baby about to arrive from St. Joseph's nursing home. I was therefore called Jiminy Cricket. Until the age of sixteen I was always called Jiminy or J.

After the end of the war, my father was much in demand abroad. In the summer of 1945 he went to Paris where he was unanimously elected President of the International Association of Art Critics. In November he flew to Switzerland to visit Carl Gustav Jung. An admirer of Jung, he had arranged before the outbreak of the war to publish his collected works in English translation at Routledge & Kegan Paul. The same idea had come to Mary Mellon, the wife of the American millionaire and philanthropist Paul Mellon, and there was a brief tussle which ended when, in March 1946, my father went to the United States to lecture at Yale. At a meeting with Mary Mellon and a college friend of her husband's, Jack Barrett who ran the Bollingen Foundation set up by Mellon to publish Jung, it was agreed that Routledge should publish Jung in Britain at the Bollingen Foundation's expense with my father as editor-in-chief.

In the course of 1947 my father was sent by the British Council to lecture in France, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark and Sweden. 'I have become a sort of Wandering Jew of British Culture', he wrote to Richard Church. Richard Aldington chastised him from America. 'You gave up far too much time and energy to public works. You should cut them off. They just use your brains and good nature and organizing ability, and they're not

really grateful.’ My father agreed but could never resist any offer to serve the cause of Art. A pre-war plan to open a Museum of Modern Art in London financed by Peggy Guggenheim now metamorphosed into a project for an Institute of Contemporary Art: this demanded innumerable meetings to raise funds and deal with the vanities and sensitivities of the prima donnas of the art world. Its establishment was announced in a letter from my father to *The Times* on 26 June, 1947.

In the same year, 1947, beyond his work as a director of Routledge and his lectures abroad, my father published books on Paul Klee and Ben Nicholson, wrote essays on Henry Moore, Paul Nash and Naum Gabo. He served on the selection committee for the Venice Biennale and helped organise the ICA’s first exhibition, *Forty Years of Modern Art*. To stem the flood of demands on his time that came through the post, he had a card printed stating: ‘Herbert Read begs to thank you for your letter, but has to inform you that he has retired from all unsolicited correspondence...and generally from all those activities which render his present existence fragmentary and futile.’ The cards were never sent out.

Despite his frequent absences, and his remoteness in his study even when at home, my father was adored by the four children of his second marriage. All discipline was left to my mother and was administered erratically. I can remember – a further embarrassment – discussing with Sophie and Tim which of our parents we preferred. We were lying in bed in a small cottage in Marton, a village in Ryedale close to Muscoates which my parents had rented for a family holiday soon after the war. We all agreed

that we preferred my father. My mother heard this conversation through the floor boards and came up to give us one of the many terrible rows.

There were other holidays in Yorkshire and one in Scotland. In 1947 we accompanied our father to Switzerland where he now went every summer – to visit Jung at Küssnacht and discuss his ideas at the Eranos Conference held at Ascona under the auspices of the Mellons' Bollingen Foundation. We returned to Ascona on a number of occasions and I have memories of the aroma of Swiss cigars; of fizzy drinks at the tables by Lake Maggiore; of trips on paddle steamers; of the tiny fish I caught off the quay which was grilled for me in the kitchen of the Hotel Seeschloss and brought ceremoniously to our table by the waiter. I remember the agony of sitting still during a recital of a late Beethoven Quartet, and watching my father listening patiently to earnest Germanic ladies of a certain age. One evening we were taken for a drink with the German author, Eric Maria Remarque, whose *All Quiet on the Western Front* my father had praised on its publication in 1929. Remarque's wife, Paulette Goddard, gave us sticky biscuits and pink Champagne. After tasting the wine Remarque said 'too sweet' and threw the bottle through the window into the lake.

It was my father's misfortune that his growing fame as an art critic in both Europe and America had smothered his reputation as a poet. Even where his energies had not gone into art criticism, they had been channelled into his writing on anarchism or psychoanalysis. When the poet Henry Treece asked two English graduates at Bedford College whether they had read any of the poetry by Herbert Read, they had said: 'What, does he write poems *as well?*'

The question was not simply whether his many different intellectual preoccupations left no room for artistic creation: there was also some doubt that, were he to close his ears to the siren voices of American universities or the British Council; ignore the importuning young poets and artists who might be the geniuses of the next generation; and, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, send his children off to a foundlings' home, his muse might *still* be mute or, worse still, inspire work that was second rate.

Stephen Spender, in an unsympathetic review of my father's *Annals of Innocence and Experience* – an unrevealing and cerebral extension of his memoir of childhood *The Innocent Eye* into his adult life – had roundly dismissed the excuses my father had put forward for not producing more works of art. He 'seems to believe,' wrote Spender, 'that, given slightly different circumstances, entirely different and much better poems and books would have emerged from his study, like rabbits from a hat'. In fact, 'if this inspiration had been really forceful it would have carried all before it...'

My father would like to have earned his living from creative writing and was not immune from that odium figulium – trade jealousy – which Schopenhauer regarded as the most ineradicable of human weaknesses. His friendship with Richard Aldington declined after the great popular success of Aldington's novel *Death of a Hero* – not because my father thought it a bad novel but because of the painful contrast between his own financial anxieties and Aldington's lotus-eating life in the United States. His friendship with Eliot survived the poet's great success, partly because my father continued to admire his poetry but also, perhaps, because Eliot was a few years older.

He nevertheless saw Eliot, if not as a rival, then as an obstacle to a wider recognition of his own talent. 'To be born in the shadow of a mighty oak,' he wrote in a poem called *Lu Yiin's Lament*, 'such was my fate...

One day the oak will fall
but whether towards me to bury me
or away from me to expose me is still unknown.

In the realm of ideas he did emerge from Eliot's shadow by taking contrary positions: where Eliot espoused Classicism, my father championed Romanticism. Where Eliot was a Christian, he was an agnostic. And it was that romanticism and agnosticism that, Spender believed, spiked his creative endeavour: 'The writers who have no sense of evil tend towards abstractionism, bloodlessness and transparency.'

Twenty years earlier, my father had felt that his creativity might flourish if he were to return to leave the suburbs of London and return to his roots in Ryedale.

Here where I labour hour by hour
The folk are mean and land is sour.
God grant I may return to die
Between the Riccall and the Rye.

He called this short poem *Exile's Lament*. He convinced himself that if he could distance himself from London, he would find the peace and quiet to write. Of course he would have to continue to earn his living; but since much of the work he did for Routledge was reading manuscripts, he

managed to persuade his fellow-directors that this could be done in the country or, indeed, on the train. He proposed spending alternate weeks in London and Yorkshire and the board agreed.

How was my mother persuaded to move to a deeply rural part of England, miles from a concert hall or opera house, where she knew no one and could hardly expect to encounter congenial neighbours who might become her friends? There can be no doubt that she was ready to leave Seer Green. She had never wanted to live in the house that my father had built with Evelyn and it was now associated with all the frustrations and privations of life during the war. Because of the discrepancy between the value of houses in North Yorkshire and the suburbs of London, they would be able to buy a much larger house.

Her principal motive for agreeing to the move was, I have no doubt, her love for my father and esteem for his work. She was never engaged in his modernist or anarchist crusades but, despite her egoism and belief in her own value as a musician, she had – perhaps from her German blood – a belief in the pre-eminence of her husband's calling. She must also have been aware of his sense of creative frustration and felt partly responsible, perhaps, that the muse with whom he had eloped from Edinburgh had not inspired great works of art.

But there was another inducement. Before she had met my father, as a member of a string quartet, she had played at a Catholic boarding school at Ampleforth in North Yorkshire run by Benedictine monks. It was not just the beauty of the place, or the serenity of the liturgy, but also the personality of one or two highly musical Benedictine monks that had impressed her. They were cultivated, amusing and, like the pupils of their school, mostly

recruited from the English upper class. If she ever had sons, my mother had decided, this was where she would like them to go school. Therefore as a quid pro quo for agreeing to join my father in his return to his roots she extracted a promise that he would pay for their three sons to go to Ampleforth.

In the summer of 1948, taking another holiday in a rented cottage in Marton, my parents found that an old rectory was for sale in the village of Stonegrave about three miles south east of Muscoates Grange. Three miles beyond Stonegrave in the same direction was the village of Gilling from which a train connected with the express to London at York. At Gilling there was also the Preparatory School for Ampleforth, itself less than five miles from the rectory. We could go to Gilling and Ampleforth as 'day boys' at reduced fees. The move was anyway financially attractive because Broom House was valued at over £8,000 whereas the rectory was for sale at around £6,000. The decision was made. Broom House was sold and the purchase of the rectory completed on 11 August 1949. The pantechinons were unloaded on 20 September and two days later, after a night in the Worsley Arms in the neighbouring village of Hovingham, the Read family moved into Stonegrave House. 'Sept. 22,' my father wrote in a note placed in the Family Bible. 'Slept in the house for the first night.'