

## Letters to Brian Busby

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In my possession I have a small selection of letters from HW to his nephew Brian Busby the younger son of his sister Biddy and William (Bill) Busby (Doris and Bob Willoughby in the novels).

There are five letters, the first one dated June 1950, then three in the Autumn of 1956, and finally one written on Christmas Day 1959. The first letter appears to have been sent shortly after the death of Brian's mother (Biddy/Doris), and in it HW wishes his nephew well in his exams. The middle three concern the forthcoming marriage of Brian; and the final letter written on Christmas Day obviously follows on from these. Three are typed and two are handwritten, one on paper with the Savage Club letter-heading, one from Ox's Cross. All were posted from Georgeham.

It is frustrating to have only one side of the correspondence – and probably an incomplete correspondence at that. One must assume HW wrote other letters to Brian in the period – perhaps only these have survived because in them HW is trying to explain to Brian his parents' relationship and his mother's upbringing and feelings.

There is no doubt HW received a lot of letters from admirers: in the 1950 letter to Brian he writes:

*This is the 27th letter I've dashed off this night – I too get lots of letters, mostly from readers of books and I try always to reply, tho at times they get in one's hair with hundreds of hours work behindhand!*

HW was inclined to exaggerate at times – his description of Clovelly, for instance, in *On Foot in Devon* where he writes – 'there is parking place above this famous beauty spot for ten million motor coaches, each with 90 wheels and a hundred feet long' – but he must indeed have received a great number of letters, to which he felt compelled to reply. He couldn't ignore them. He had been politely brought up, and expected the courtesy of a reply to HIS letters, so therefore had to reply to the letters HE received. This is shown very clearly in the September 1956 letter to Brian:

*I remember with gratitude that you had the courtesy to reply to a letter sending £5 to Michael [Brian's brother] when his mother died. That young man apparently lacked the good manners to reply; the reason, again, lies I think in his upbringing. Years before, when you were both small, I sent both of you some cash for Christmas, by March I was still wondering if it had ever arrived. So I wrote to my sister, who replied Oh yes the money came, but the boys have been too busy to write to you. I mention this only as an example of what not to do. It reflects on one, if one does not realise that 'other people's feelings are as important as one's own.*

He valued letters – and twice in those five letters to Brian, comments on the fact that all his letters had been destroyed by his father.

*Neither of my parents cared for my work, indeed my father burned all the letters I had written to my mother from 1919 to her death, together with irreplaceable Mss, just before he died.*

Perhaps he had an eye for posterity as well as he continues:

*That is tragic and will be, one day, the subject of much literary comment in biographies etc. Just think of another poorboy genius – D.H. Lawrence – who has had over 500 books written about him since he died in 1930 – and how every scrap of his writings has been collected and salted for university museums etc. etc.*

The main theme of these five letters is the unhappy relationship between Brian's parents, (Doris and Bob Willoughby in the *Chronicle*); going back to the unhappy relationship between Biddy/Doris and HER father Richard, and between her father and mother, Richard and Hetty; and the effects all this has had on the character of Brian, and on Brian's older brother Michael.

Henry was very perceptive about relationships, particularly within his family, and he tries to explain to Brian how the past had affected Biddy/Doris, and warns him not to let the past affect HIS own marriage.

Readers of the *Chronicle* will remember the incident in *Donkey Boy* where Doris threatens to kill Richard with a knife. This seems to have been based on a real incident for HW writes to Brian:

*Biddy was so unhappy as a child; she stood up to her father being unkind to her mother and often was blitzed. 'You brute' cried his small child 'I'll kill you one day'. She grew up like that, shut in. It began when she was 3-4 years old. She was a brave child, and fixed in her defence of her mother, who often wept, when her father was complaining and 'mobbing' as they say in Norfolk.*

In the letters Henry says that Biddy grew up without love, also that he himself was able to become whole through his writings but that Biddy did not have this release.

Talking about his father, Henry writes:

*WHY he was like this is another story; he too suffered; his mind was tidy and logical, his wife had the Celtic intuitive mind, which was often inaccurate over facts and also being extremely nervous, my mother often said things just to keep the peace. – My remaining Williamson aunt believes still that my father was ruined by marriage with my mother. He was gentle and amusing and so kind and tolerant before his marriage she said; afterwards he was entirely changed. True. Also true for my mother.*

In *It was the Nightingale* Doris and Bob Willoughby come to stay with Phillip in Devon. Doris tells her mother that whenever her husband comes near her, she remembers Percy Pickering and can't bear Willoughby. In his letter Henry writes:

*Your father showed great patience and consideration, for years, with a stubborn shut-in condition in his wife: a condition I had long found distressing and impossible to deal with. He was on the contrary extremely patient. Among other things, the marriage was not consummated until 6 months after the wedding (which was a foolish runaway marriage, upsetting everyone, and doing no good to anyone). When WHB broke he walked away. It was then a desperate situation as I saw it; both sides had come to the limit, to the break-down; and had he been the sort to stick it out i.e. obstinate, a tragic ending might easily have occurred. The extreme tragedy, I mean; suicide, possibly worse. She was not the one for WHB ... her heart petrified when Charlie Boon was killed at Beaumont Hamel in November 1916.*

Henry writes of his own marriages in this letter of 1956. He points out that Brian has taken only his mother's side in the dispute – he doesn't know his father – and that he has listened and been too sympathetic to his mother.

*In my own case, of the first marriage, my wife's fineness of character prevented her from ever complaining to the children. She kept her own fox under her cloak. She saw how she could not really help someone much more dynamic than herself; however hard she tried. Eventually when things came to a head, as they were bound to do, she acted; for the good of all. 'I did it because I thought the children might lose respect for you', she said, later on, when we became good friends. 'You took on far too much and I was afraid that if I did not make a move it might end in tragedy, for you were worn out and becoming violent.' How true. I hated myself, deplored how I was sinking down into rages and death wish. Longing for oblivion, as the final act of a failed life, a disgraced life, self-disgrace. Now we have recovered. Creativeness has taken the place, on both sides, of what was mortified. Her circumstances of birth, and education and a happy home, enabled her to see and appreciate what could not be seen and understood in a narrow, cramped lower middle class home such as mine was.'*

Of his second marriage, he writes on Christmas Day 1959:

*My wife is a school teacher and suffers from her papa having deserted her mother when she was 3 years of age. So I am a sort of 'father figure' which is an uneasy condition as a husband.*

Brian's elder brother Michael is often mentioned in the letters –

*I wonder if what he told you about me is reliable writes HW in 1956. 'For one thing it was told me by someone whom he saw after his visit here that M. had declared that my wife made coffee and presumably served it to him, from water in which the baby's nappies had been boiled or rinsed. This of course is an unusual thing to say, quite apart from its slanderous nature. Perhaps I am prejudiced; for I have only just completed a long investigation into certain books he sold to a Leeds bookseller in January 1956.*

These were in fact part of a set HW had given to his mother and which he felt did not belong to Michael. HW felt very aggrieved (and grieved) by this, and devotes much of the letter to this subject. Michael's behaviour obviously concerned HW for many years – although in some ways he felt in sympathy with him:

*He is much as I was – encysted, shut in by himself... until one day they're up against it, then the cyst breaks, pours the wetness over them in suffering and they realise – this last happened to me – almost a new birth (of consciousness).*

And again in the Christmas Day 1959 letter, HW is responding sympathetically to Michael's apparent erratic behaviour;

*We all saw on the Norfolk farm in 1943-4 when Michael came down that he was living in a trauma, his feet were not on the ground. A breakdown of the maladjusted boy become man was inevitable. From the breakdown new clearer growth may come, once he knows himself. It is I think up to the individual himself.*

To end on a lighter note: The wedding present. Brian is getting married in 1956, and HW asks if he has a wedding present list. Poor Brian probably wishes he hadn't responded to this.

*Fish knives; NO! They are a clan with serviettes etc. People use table napkins and ordinary forks for their fish. 'Fish knives' were a vulgar Victorian invention, like plastic cups today and Cup Tie cardboard hats, doilies, little fork knives for cake etc. etc. or 'the lounge' of a modern house.*

So what did Brian get for a wedding present? Some Wedgewood cups etc. sent by post (£10 registration to cover any breakages) from The Pottery Shop, 23 High Street, Ilfracombe, with Henry making a careful note of invoice number in the margin of his letter to Brian.

*No doubt you will get several such sets. But through the ages a saucer there remaining, or here, reminds me of far-off early days, which often seem as yesterday... My experience, for what it is worth, is that as one grows older, one values certain links with past life, which in youth one doesn't care a hoot about. One does not change as one grows older; one reflects more. Especially on early days. One comes back to one's beginnings.*

A deeper study of the relationship between the letters and the novel sequence could prove most interesting. For instance, was HW so wrapped up in the novels that for him as well as us the dividing line between the novels and real life was increasingly blurred. He certainly found it impossible to attend Brian's wedding, as he writes:

*... as the book I am writing now and have been on 7 days a week since March, living almost as a recluse (as one has to do, to expend every effort on a work) all this year. Whether it is done by early October I can't tell; if it isn't I'll have to stop here until it is, not breaking the traumatic tension by so much as one evening out anywhere among people. Two days in London would be, I fear, fatal, however charming the occasion. In fact the happier it is, the worse for the psyche living in a dream world. For me it is a very difficult and exhausting job.*

Although a very small sample of HW's output, these five letters to his nephew seem to encapsulate a great deal of his life, philosophy and work. The great theme throughout *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, is considered to be that of Cause and Effect, and this is clearly illustrated here, where HW the philosopher is also HW the concerned uncle.

### **Postscript to the Norfolk Weekend** (see following page)

Alex Marsh, the present owner of Henry's old Silver Eagle Alvis, DR 6084, took the car to International Alvis Day where it was entered into a competition for 'Best car once owned by a Celebrity'. Richard provided an excellent back up display showing the car's history, with passages from the books, and photographs etc. [Other celebrity names included Benjamin Britten, Jack Hawkins and Douglas Bader]. We are pleased to announce that Henry's car won FIRST PRIZE and will feature in the next issue of The Alvis Owner's Club magazine.