Chapter 3

Four Early Novels

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R.C.H. and Margaret were pleased to be able to spend the £27 earned from the publication of *Thou Hast A Devil* to pay for the services of a doctor and a nursing home for the arrival of their first child, Ann Coryton, born on the last day of December 1930. Now parenthood was to be added to the demands of the office and the writing desk, but R.C.H. was fortunate to have found an enthusiastic secretarial assistant, proof-reader, eager encourager, and shrewd critic in the person of Margaret. R.C.H. never learnt to type, nor wanted to. He wrote with the same fountain pen he had used at school, dipping the nib into the ink bottle. Until sufficient funds had allowed for the employment of professional help, Margaret typed the first two novels and, in the case of *Thou Hast A Devil,* R.C.H. 'lovingly dedicates this fable to the typist, who despite what she suffered in transcribing the author's manuscript, was yet so rash as to marry the author'. He always described Margaret as 'my chief literary adviser' and she wrote to him early in his move to Norwich: 'you must go on writing when you have time and ideas, and we'll see you famous yet. I don't think you're the sort of man to let business take away your imagination. I do hope we both keep our imagination all through our life.' Their relationship was as rich a creative partnership as a personal one.

One of the characteristics of R.C.H.'s style is that every novel is *sui generis*, in tone and often in form. This may be one explanation for his uneven popularity in terms of readership. He followed no trend, paid no allegiance to anything beyond his own artistic convictions: 'I have always written exactly what and how I wanted … if you do that

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you can't expect a very large audience. I have never made allowances for my reader.' This element of his creative stance is linked to an imagination which, like his obsession with travel, was always on the move. No sooner had he written the final sentence of one novel than he was working on the next, sometimes having two in his mind simultaneously. Within a few weeks of completing *Thou Hast A Devil* he was composing a quite different script: a novel, comic in tone, consisting of letters from a young man to his maiden aunt, entitled *The Caravan Of Culture*. He seemed only half confident of its quality (his self-confessed youthful 'un-self-critical' approach to his work was quickly being refined), and this was evident in his intention to publish under a pseudonym, Patricia Post. He described it as a 'trivial pot-boiler' and it certainly failed to boil any pots as it was the only completed adult novel to remain unpublished.

There is no evidence that he ever had any contact with Graham Greene, or had read any of his novels, but they certainly shared many interesting characteristics, which were evident even from this early period. Separated in age by less than three years, and briefly overlapping as Oxford undergraduates, they both wrote about religious doubts and challenges, even if from different theological perspectives – Greene often seen as the doyen of twentieth-century Catholic novelists. R.C.H. would certainly have sympathy with Greene's aversion to being described as a 'Roman Catholic' writer rather than as a novelist who happened to be a Catholic. Greene also often combined serious themes with the elements of the thriller. R.C.H. shared this attractive juxtaposition, evident in some of his own novels such as *March the Ninth*. Forty years after R.C.H.'s unsuccessful pot-boiler about a young man's relationship with his maiden aunt, Greene published his highly successful pot-boiler about a nephew's relationship with his (supposed) maiden aunt in his novel *Travels With My Aunt*.

After setting aside *The Caravan Of Culture*, R.C.H. was much happier with what was in his mind, and was to emerge as his second published novel, *The Answering Glory*. The reader's immediate response might easily be that here was a novel completely different from *Thou Hast A Devil*. We are not taken to a strange land, at an undefined time, by means of flamboyant transport; we are placed firmly in the 1930s, partly in southern England and partly in an imaginary remote and sparsely populated island off the coast of Africa. We are asked to see events not through the eyes of an idealistic young man, but from the

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perspective of two very different females – an elderly spinster and a young school-leaver. We are not asked to reflect on social, economic, and political philosophies, with some passing witty observations on social pretensions described through external physical cameos of behaviour and modes of speech and conversation. R.C.H. has moved to more internal observations of characters' hopes and convictions, however eccentric, and although the tone is mostly humorous, it is laughter more often derived from sympathetic understanding than from external caricature. It is probably the novel which exhibits R.C.H.'s control of pathos more acutely than any other.

The novel's central issue remains, however, as in the first novel: religion. But the focus this time is on how characters react to their individual experiences and suggests no particular preferred route to enlightenment. If *Thou Hast A Devil* sees life through the lens of an imaginary telescope, R.C.H. has changed his artistic optical aid to a magnifying glass, now being viewed through more mature and objective eyes.

The central character is an elderly Plymouth Brethren missionary, Miss Thompson (her first name is never revealed), who has spent her life dedicated to converting the inhabitants of the unhealthy swamps of São Maharo. She has taught herself enough basic medicine to provide the only medical facility available, and her home doubles as a daily surgery, her patients seeing her as the bringer of all goodness and wisdom, devoted to her as the accepted matriarch and arbiter of disputes among this impoverished and disease-ridden island. Her few free hours are spent on turning the Talusa tongue – they have no written form of language – into an orally memorable version of the gospels. She may be frail in stature but she is fearless and invincible in spirit. Undaunted by physical or natural dangers she travels by canoe through crocodile-infested waters to restrain a powerful, drunken native attempting to kill his wife for giving birth to a still-born son. She confronts the 15-stone raving figure, orders him to be tied and bound until he sobers up. She forms a particularly strong bond with a young boy, Peter, who appoints himself as a personal servant to 'Mother Thompson' and reports for duty on a daily basis.

Miss Thompson only feels at home in Maharo and is determined to be buried on Maharan soil. Unfortunately she succumbs to the violent hossi fever of the Talusas and is forced to return to England for treatment and recuperation. She promises: 'I SHALL COME BACK.'

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Every day Peter makes the arduous journey across the forest and climbs the steep rock-face to have a view of the sea to watch out for the sign of a ship bringing back 'Mother Thompson'. Every day, for several months, he returns through the dark trees, sad and frightened: 'She does not come', he cries.

Once in England, the tone changes. Miss Thompson may not bat an eyelid travelling by canoe to pacify a drunken, murderous Talusan, but is quite unable to make a journey through London, involving buses and the underground, without a chaperone. Always terrified as to whether she is complying with etiquette or not, even a visit to a tea shop is an expedition involving fear of social solecisms. Such excursions are interspersed with evocative descriptions of meetings with the tireless Miss Green, surrounded by bulging files and piles of letters in the cobwebbed office of Miss Warrener's Womens' Missionary Society.

Miss Thompson is sent for convalescence to Mrs Fuller's boarding house for missionaries on furlough. There are delightful descriptions of life in such establishments, including breakfasts:

> The brown dish-cover had not yet been lifted, but they knew it was dried haddock. Still, it would be boiled eggs tomorrow – haddock had not yet been so impertinent as to appear on a Sunday – and there was a good chance that they would not be under-boiled, as a very tactful remark had been made last Sunday about under-boiling; they might be hard-boiled, but you could always put in a little piece of butter if Mrs. Fuller's attention was engaged. Tomorrow was also the day for a clean cloth and clean napkins ; it would be the blue check, the two yellow check having run their course. The blue check was brighter and jollier than the yellow ones. The present cloth had reached a very dingy stage (Mrs. Fuller saw no point in removing it between meals; there was a little desk for the ladies to do their writing and sewing could be done on the sofa)… Miss Thompson watched the plates. She was hoping to get the one with the three chips in the edge. That one, she knew, was alright. There was one with a crack right across, and a little tributary crack forming a narrow segment. It was bound to break before long…

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It is a world as vivid as that to be captured 20 years later by Barbara Pym. Miss Thompson is treated by the kindly Dr Crewe who observes to himself that all the missionaries under his care seem to have something in common: 'restlessness, a kind of beautiful insanity'. This 'insanity' comes to the fore in the middle section of the novel, set in the exclusive, evangelical girls' boarding school, Huntersfield, dedicated to hockey and Christianity, under the watchful eye of the Principal, The Honourable Augusta Lesage. It reads like a parody of the novels of Angela Brazil – at her most popular at the time of the writing of *The Answering Glory*. Huntersfield is to provide the audience for the distressed Miss Thompson who has rashly volunteered, at 24 hours' notice, to give a lecture replacing an indisposed missionary. All she has is a set of slides depicting an African country which she has never visited and a set of notes she cannot decipher. But before she faces this ordeal she is subjected to a guided tour of the school's new laboratory by the senior science mistress, Miss Halliwell. Miss Thompson knows nothing about Physics or Chemistry and is fearful of not showing sufficient interest or, worse still, of asking embarrassing questions:

> Miss Thompson gazed at a row of jars. If only there was one labelled H_2SO_4 she would be able to show that she was not without education. Miss Halliwell moved towards her first exhibit.
>
> 'This is the G. and M. Universal Spectrophotometer.'
>
> 'Oh, yes.'
>
> 'These are chainomatic balances.'
>
> 'Oh, I see,'
>
> Miss Thompson gazed at the chainomatic balances. Miss Halliwell courteously gave her full time to absorb their features, before moving on.
>
> 'This is another chainomatic balance,' she said.
>
> 'Oh, you have several?'
>
> 'Yes, three.'…
>
> 'This,' said Miss Halliwell gloomily, 'is the Van Slyke manometric gas apparatus. It's rather an up-to-date type – the Bale-Stoney.'
>
> 'What does it do?'
>
> 'Oh, we use it chiefly for the microanalysis of blood.'
>
> 'Oh, I see.'…
>
> 'I expect you've seen a Rehwald micro-burette?'

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'No, I don't think so.'

'Oh. This is one.'

'Oh, yes.'

We're rather proud of this,' Miss Halliwell said without enthusiasm, 'not many schools have them.'

'What is it?'

'It's a Lovibond Tintometer.'

'Oh, yes.'

'Would you like to see the new lecture-room?'

'I would, very much.'

Miss Haliwell led the way up a few stairs, opened another door, and stood aside for Miss Thompson to see in…

'Oh, is this the lecture room?'Miss Halliwell admitted that it was the lecture-room…

'Is there anything more?' Miss Thompson wondered. 'I must show appreciation somehow, it's so good of her to take all this trouble. Oh, we've got back to the same room, so we must have seen everything.' 'This is the senior physics lab.,' Miss Halliwell said remorselessly. (Oh, then it wasn't the same room! But it looked exactly the same.) 'This is a thermohydrograph.'

Miss Thompson examined the thermohydrograph carefully.

'It's rather like the – the thing we saw in the other room,' she suggested.

'Oh, do you think so?' Miss Halliwell asked with cold politeness.

'Well, just a little bit.'

'Oh.' Miss Halliwell moved on. 'This is rather interesting – an autographic Atwood machine.'

'Yes, very interesting… Do you find teaching interesting?'

'No, not very.'

'That's a pity.'

'Yes.'

There can have been few less relaxing moments before Miss Thompson found herself on the platform, stumbling through her lecture. In an attempt to rescue some dignity she returned to familiar territory and for the last few minutes spoke of her own experiences and work in São Maharo. Little could she guess how influential those

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last words were to be on the life of one girl in the audience, Barbara – in her last few weeks at school, and who had little, if any, religious enthusiasms.

The girls at Huntersfield divided themselves into two groups – the 'piety squad' who attended prayer meetings, and a more cynical squad who saw little point in the values which the school attempted to instil. It was from this latter group that Barbara emerged. She despised anyone who didn't display defiance or show – her favourite word – 'guts'. (One recalls R.C.H.'s phrase in the 'red book': '*guts*, ah, sweet word'). Barbara turns on a giggling group of girls who are making fun of Miss Thompson's fumbling lecture: 'My God! If you little swine had got a tenth of that woman's guts you'd be of some use in the world.' And so, within months, this worldly, cigarette-smoking, whisky-drinking young lady, with flimsy obvious religious piety, follows in the footsteps of Miss Thompson (whose final semi-conscious conviction is that she has returned to São Mahara) and journeys to attempt to replace Miss Thompson among the Talusas. R.C.H. often had several possible titles for a novel, and one in an early draft for *The Answering Glory* is tellingly, *Strange Return*.

The *actual* title is taken from a line in a poem by Robert Louis Stevenson, 'If This Were Faith', which extols bravery in the face of suffering, both at 'Golgotha and Khartoum'. R.C.H. later wrote:

> You might perhaps say that the book is a *story*, and not some form of propaganda dressed up as a story; and that the theme of the book is courage as humanity's highest common denomination (to use a clumsy expression). The suggestion being that courage takes its place besides Love as part of the main strength of Christianity.

A pivotal moment for Barbara as she struggles to decide why she wishes to go San Marino comes on a visit to the studio of her artist father. This is to become a familiar setting for critical moments in the novels, and paintings – particularly portraits – often form the focus of such scenes. In *The Stepmother* a portrait almost takes on the role of a character within the novel. In Barbara's case, Dr Crewe's observation of the 'beautiful insanity' of his patients is combined with Barbara's father's thoughts on the world of the artist. He has asked whether Barbara's desire to follow Miss Thompson is purely 'an adventure'. She replies:

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> 'No. There's nothing so stupid as an objectless adventure. It's an adventure to jump off the top of a bus, but it's not worth doing'…
>
> 'You know, I'm afraid you're a Quixote.'
>
> 'Well, aren't you? You're only really happy when you're painting something only a dozen or so people can appreciate.'
>
> He hesitated.
>
> 'Yes,' he said slowly. 'Art, I'm afraid is a quixotic business. But then no one has ever pretended that the artist is really sane.'
>
> 'Isn't there something rather important in insanity?'
>
> 'Mm – Yes. Provided that you're sane periodically.'
>
> Barbara's eyes are turned to one of her father's favourite paintings, which had never achieved critical acclaim:
>
> She looked up at the 'Genius of Warfare', so that his eyes followed the direction of hers and rested, with hers, on the little card which said defiantly. 'Rejected. 1922.'
>
> 'Isn't that important?' she asked, nodding at the soldier's strange piercing eyes. More important than anything else?'
>
> 'Yes,' he said.

SAMPLE

The novel had its popularity, though not within the walls of Monkton Combe where Huntersfield was quickly seen as a parody of Monkton. Indeed, the Secretary of the Old Monktonian Club suggested that the school governors should have been consulted before publication. R.C.H. would have taken pleasure in one reviewer's observation that 'the pictures of girls' school life hit the mark too incredibly accurately to come from the pen of a man'. Clearly Margaret's experience contributed considerably to this evocation.

R.C.H.'s parents must have had a generous sense of humour to appreciate the book's portrayal of evangelicalism, for it was to them that R.C.H. dedicated the novel. But perhaps he was really offering to them what is the underlying tone of the work – a sympathetic understanding of religious convictions, the extremes of which the author himself could not embrace, but the genuine nature of which, and the courage in which they were held, he never doubted. It remained a novel for which he had great affection.

Rupert Hart-Davis described the first two novels in military terms as 'sighting shots', and R.C.H. had the conviction from his teen days

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