

## Prologue

By 1976, R.C. Hutchinson was an acclaimed novelist, winner of the *Sunday Times* 'Gold Medal for Fiction' for his novel *Testament*, winner of the W.H. Smith Award for his novel *A Child Possessed* and shortlisted for the Booker Prize for his final novel *Rising*. At his death he had published seventeen novels, including *The Unforgotten Prisoner* – which achieved 150,000 sales in its first month. He was highly regarded by many of his contemporary writers, including Stephen Spender and Cecil Day Lewis. Fifty years later he has become an almost forgotten figure, mostly out of print, though he has always had his enthusiastic followers such as the novelist Sebastian Faulks, the theologian and writer Bishop Richard Harries, and the acclaimed cellist Steven Isserlis.

Hutchinson claimed in a remarkable schoolboy diary (written at the age of 15, and reading like a draft of a mature autobiography) that 'I have decided to write a diary of thought, since my life consists, I think, more in thought than in deed.' Certainly his personal life was to be predominantly a private one, devoid of scandal, centred on a happy marriage and family life, and lived more in the seclusion of his library than in the literary world, which held little appeal to him, partly from an innate shyness. His writings will not evoke the literary or social life of his times, and he never followed the changing tastes of the novel-reading public. The novels, however, offer an extraordinary vision of the world of Europe before and after the Second World War (a vision in part influenced by his own unusual war experience), and concentrate on the effects of war on its survivors.

Most remarkable is his ability to write with exceptional authenticity about places he had never visited. This imaginative ability extends to an acute understanding and sympathy with the internal

sufferings of his characters: as one acute critic observed, he takes his readers 'along some private avenue where nobody walks but he' and another describes his 'penetrative eye which drives into the odd corners of the soul'. His vision that the answer to human suffering lies in his own belief in the power of divine intervention is a constant theme throughout his work, though his characters are never just mere puppets. The characters are instead sympathetically seen as striving for some sense of release from their individual spiritual journeys. All this is tempered occasionally with a highly individual strand of humour, sometimes dark, sometimes highly comic.

One loyal publisher, Peter Day, who reissued three of Hutchinson's novels, explained his aim in rescuing 'forgotten' authors:

What is it that makes us pick up and read a book again and again? The memory of that first immersion when everything but what we were reading pales into insignificance? When the book ate with us, walked with us, travelled with us, slept with us, and, when it was finished, we grieved as for the loss of a close friend ... There comes a time when we realise that we haven't seen it let alone read it for years, and when we try to get it in the bookshop find that it is out of print and there are no plans to reprint ... these are my favourites, books I think should be in print, books I really believe you will want to read and enjoy, books that will speak to you as they have to me.

These wise words encapsulate the intention of this volume, in offering the works of Ray Coryton Hutchinson to a new readership. The story begins in a delightful Somerset valley, where the teenage Hutchinson was writing his private diary, which he referred to as his 'red book'.