

## THE BOOK OF MERLYN

### The Story of the Book

*Sylvia Townsend Warner*

(Prologue to *The Book of Merlyn* by T.H.White, Collins, 1978)

The dream, like the one before it, lasted about half an hour. In the last three minutes of the dream some fishes, dragons and such-like ran hurriedly about. A dragon swallowed one of the pebbles, but spat it out.

In the ultimate twinkling of an eye, far tinier in time than the last millimetre on a six-foot rule, there came a man. He split up the one pebble which remained of all that mountain with blows; then made an arrow-head of it, and slew his brother.

*The Sword in the Stone*  
Chapter 18, original version

MY FATHER made me a wooden castle big enough to get into, and he fixed real pistol barrels beneath its battlements to fire a salute on my birthday, but made me sit in front the first night - that deep Indian night - to receive the salute, and I, believing I was to be shot, cried.

Throughout his life White was subject to fears: fears from without - a menacing psychopathic mother, the prefects at Cheltenham College 'rattling their canes,' poverty, tuberculosis, public opinion; fears from within - fear of being afraid, of being a failure, of being trapped. He was afraid of death, afraid of the dark. He was afraid of his own proclivities, which might be called vices: drink, boys, a latent sadism. Notably free from fearing God, he was basically afraid of the human race. His life was a running battle with

these fears, which he fought with courage, levity, sardonic wit, and industry. He was never without a project, never tired of learning, and had a high opinion of his capacities.

This high opinion was shared by his teachers at the University of Cambridge. When tuberculosis tripped him in his second year, a group of dons made up a sum of money sufficient to send him to Italy for a year's convalescence. He took to Italy like a duck to water, learned the language, made some low friends, studied pension life, and wrote his first novel, *They Winter Abroad*. The inaugurator of the convalescent fund recalled: ' . . . he returned in great form, determined to have the examiner's blood in Part II; and sure enough in 1929 he took a tearing First Class with Distinction.'

In 1932, on a Cambridge recommendation, he was appointed head of the English Department at Stowe School. It was a position of authority under an enlightened headmaster who allowed him ample rope. His pupils still remember him, some for the stimulus of his teaching, others for the sting of his criticism, others again for extracurriculum rambles in search of grass snakes. He learned to fly, in order to come to terms with a fear of falling from high places, and to think rather better of the human race by meeting farm labourers at the local inn. After a couple of years he tired of Stowe, and decided on no evidence that his headmaster meant to get rid of him. With poverty a fear to be reckoned with, he constructed two potboilers and compiled another. An Easter holiday fishing in rain and solitude on a Highland river showed him what he really wanted - to write in freedom, to land a book of his own as well as a salmon.

At midsummer 1936 he gave up his post and rented a gamekeeper's cottage at Stowe Ridings on the Stowe estate. The compiled potboiler, made up of extracts from his fishing, hunting, shooting, and flying diaries and called *England Have My Bones*, sold so well that its publisher undertook to pay him £200 a year against a yearly book.

The gamekeeper's cottage stood among woodlands - a sturdy Victorian structure without amenities. It was by lamplight that White pulled from a shelf the copy of the

*Morte d'Arthur* he had used for the essay on Malory he submitted for the English tripos, Part I. Then he had been concerned with the impression he would make on the examiners. Now he read with a free mind.

One of the advantages of having taken a First Class with Distinction in English is a capacity to read. White read the *Morte d'Arthur* as acutely as though he were reading a brief. The note in which he summarized his findings may be his first step toward *The Once and Future King*:

'The whole Arthurian story is a regular greek doom, comparable to that of Orestes.

'Uther started the wrong-doing upon the family of the duke of Cornwall, and it was the descendant of that family who finally revenged the wrong upon Arthur. The fathers have eaten sour grapes etc. Arthur had to pay for his father's initial transgression, but, to make it fairer, the fates ordained that he himself should also make a transgression (against the Cornwalls) in order to bind him more closely in identification with the doom.

'It happened like this.

'The Duke of Cornwall married Igraine and they had three daughters, Morgan le Fay, Elaine and Morgause.

'Uther Pendragon fell in love with Igraine and slew her husband in war, in order to get her. Upon her he begot Arthur, so that Arthur was half brother to the three girls. But he was brought up separately.

'The girls married Uriens, Nentres and Lot, all kings. They would naturally have a dislike for Uther and anybody who had anything to do with Uther.

'When Uther died and Arthur succeeded him in mysterious circumstances, naturally Arthur inherited this feud. The girls persuaded their husbands to lead a revolt of eleven kings.

'Arthur had been told that Uther was his father, but Uther had been a vigorous old gentleman and Merlyn had very stupidly forgotten to tell Arthur who his mother was.

'After a great battle in which the kings were subdued, Morgause, the wife of King Lot, came to Arthur on an embassy. They did not know of their relationship at this time. They fell for each other, went to bed together, and the result was *Mordred*. Mordred was thus the fruit of incest (his father was his mother's half brother), and it was he who finally brought the doom on Arthur's head. The sin was incest, the punishment Guinever, and the instrument of punishment Mordred, the fruit of the sin. It was Mordred who insisted on

blowing the gaff on Launcelot and Guinever's affair, which Arthur was content to overlook, so long as it was not put into words.'

*En trentiesme année de mon aage  
Quand toutes mes hontes j'ai bues*

White was thirty when he rented the gamekeeper's cottage. He had done with his past, he was on good terms with himself, he was free. His solitude was peopled by a succession of hawks, a rescued tawny owl, a setter bitch on whom he unloosed his frustrated capacity to love. Now in the *Morte d'Arthur*, he had a subject into which he could unloose his frustrated capacity for hero worship, his accumulated miscellany of scholarship, his love of living, his admiration of Malory. It is as though, beginning a new subject, he wrote as a novice. Instead of the arid dexterity of the potboilers, *The Sword in the Stone* has the impetus and recklessness of a beginner's work. It is full of poetry, farce, invention, iconoclasm, and, above all, the reverence due to youth in its portrayal of the young Arthur. It was accepted for publication on both sides of the Atlantic, and in the United States was being considered by the Book of the Month Club - who took it. But it was 1938, the year of Munich; the pistol barrels in the toy fort were charged for more than a salute. Fear of war half choked him when he was fitted with a gasmask, retreated when Chamberlain bought peace on Hitler's terms, but could not be dismissed.

White's thinking was typical of the postwar epoch. War was a ruinous dementia. It silenced law, it killed poets, it exalted the proud, filled the greedy with good things, and oppressed the humble and meek; no good could come of it, it was hopelessly out of date. No one wanted it. (Unfortunately, no one had passionately wanted the League of Nations, either.) If, against reason and common sense, another war should break out, he must declare himself a conscientious objector. In the first lemming rush to volunteer, he wrote to David Garnett: 'I have written to Siegfried Sassoon and the headmaster of Stowe (my poor list of influential people) to ask them if they can get me any sensible job in this wretched war, if it starts. This is the ultimatum: I propose to enlist as a

private soldier in one month after the outbreak of hostilities, unless one of you gets me an *efficient* job before that.'

Chamberlain capitulated, the crisis went off the boil, White began *The Witch in the Wood* (the second volume of *The Once and Future King*) and was diverted to *Grief for the Grey Geese*, a novel he never finished. It was conceived in a state of intense physical excitement. He was alone, he was in the intimidating sea-level territory of the Wash, he was pursuing a long-ambitioned desire, intricately compounded of sporting prowess and sadism - to shoot a wild goose in flight. The theme is significant. The geese are warred on by the goose shooters. Among the goose shooters is a renegade who takes sides with the geese, deflecting their flight away from the ranks of the shooters. White plainly identifies himself with the renegade, while bent on shooting a wild goose.

In January 1939 he wrote to Garnett, who had invited him to go salmon fishing in Ireland: 'If only I can get out of this doomed country before the crash, I shall be happy. Two years of worry on the subject have convinced me that I had better run for my life, and have a certain right to do so. I may just as well do this as shoot myself on the outbreak of hostilities. I don't like war, I don't want war, and I didn't start it. I think I could just bear life as a coward, but I couldn't bear it as a hero.'

A month later he was in Ireland, lodging in a farmhouse called Doolistown, in County Meath, where he proposed to stay long enough to finish *The Witch in the Wood* (published shortly thereafter) and catch a salmon. It was his home for the next six and a half years. For six of them he never heard an English voice and rarely a cultivated one. Provincial Ireland swallowed him like a deep bog.

He had escaped his doomed country, but he could not avoid being in earshot of it.

Diary, April 26th, 1939

Conscription is now seriously spoken of in England, and everybody lives from one speech of Hitler's to the next. I read back in this book at the various tawdy little decisions which I have tried to make under the pressure of the Beast: to be a conscientious objector, and then to fight, and then to seek some constructive

wartime employment which might combine creative work with service to my country. All these sad and terrified dashes from one hunted corner to the next.

Meanwhile he tried to protect his peace of mind by dashes in new directions. Lodging in a Catholic household and treated as one of the family, he considered becoming a Catholic. Because his father had happened to be born in Ireland, he deluded himself with an idea of Irish ancestry. He read books on Irish history, with scholarly dispassionateness reading authors on either side of that vexed question; he tried to learn Erse, going once a week to the local schoolmaster for lessons and 'doing an hour's prep every morning'; he looked for a habitation, and rented a house called Sheskin Lodge in County Mayo for the shooting; later, he made researches into the legendary Godstone on the island of Inniskea. More to the purpose, being involuntary, he was captured by the sombre beauty, the desolate charm, of Erris - that part of County Mayo lying between the Nephin Beg range and the sea.

It was at Sheskin Lodge, embowered in fuchsias and rhododendron thickets and surrounded by leagues of bog, that he heard the last English voices. They were saying Good-bye. War had been declared, the visiting Garnetts were going back to England.

The tenancy of Sheskin ran out, he returned to Doolistown and listened to the news.

October 20th, 1939

There don't seem to be many people being killed yet - no hideous slaughters of gas and bacteria.

But the truth is going.

We are suffocating in propaganda instead of gas, slowly feeling our minds go dead.

October 23rd

The war as one hears of it over the wireless is more terrible than anything I can imagine of mere death. It seems to me that death must be a noble and terrible mystery, whatever one's creed or one's circumstance of dying. It is a natural thing, anyway. But what is happening over the wireless is not natural. The timbre of the voices which sing about Hitler and death is a sneering, nasal mock-timbre. Devils in hell must sing like this.

By then he was preparing for *The Ill-Made Knight* (*The Witch in the Wood*, delivered to his publisher six months earlier, had been returned with a request that it might be rewritten) and making an analysis of the character of Malory's Sir Lancelot - with traits akin to his own: 'Probably sadistic, or he would not have taken such frightful care to be gentle. Fond of being alone'

In the analysis of Guenever, where he had nothing personal to go on, he speculates, and does his best to overcome his aversion to women. 'Guenever had some good characteristics. She chose the best lover she could have done and was brave enough to let him be her lover.' 'Guenever hardly seems to have been a favourite of Malory's, whatever Tennyson may have thought about her.'

It was a new departure for White to approach a book so deliberately or write it so compactly. There is no easy-going writing in *The Ill-Made Knight*, where the Doom tightens on Arthur, and Lancelot is compelled to be instrumental in it by his love for Guenever.

He wrote it in Erris, in the small-town hotel at Belmullet, between researches into the Godstone, lying out on freezing mornings waiting for the passage of the wild geese, local jovialities, and drinking fits after which he would lock himself in his hotel bedroom in terror of the I.R.A.

On October 1st, having completed *The Ill-Made Knight*, he put Erris behind him and went back to Doolistown to write *The Candle in the Wind*. This, the last *Morte d'Arthur* book, in which the doomed king staggers from defeat to defeat, already existed as the skeleton of a play. White was incapable of writing slowly. By mid-autumn the play was brought to life as a narrative, and he was considering titles for the complete tetralogy: *The Ancient Wrong . . . Arthur Pendragon . . .*

November 14th, 1940

Pendragon can still be saved, and elevated into a superb success, by altering the last part of Book 4, and taking Arthur back to his animals. The legend of his going underground at the end, into the badger's sett, where badger, hedgehog, snake, pike (stuffed in case) and all the rest of them can be waiting to talk it over with him. Now, with Merlyn, they must discuss war from the naturalist's point of

view, as I have been doing in this diary lately. They must decide to talk thoroughly over, during Arthur's long retirement underground, the relation of Man to the other animals, in the hope of getting a new angle on his problem from this. Such, indeed, was Merlyn's original objective in introducing him to the animals in the first place. Now what can we learn about abolition of war from animals?

'Pendragon can still be saved.' Another salvation was involved. White had gone to Belmullet assuming himself to be at home in Ireland. He came away an Englishman in exile. He had been received, and welcomed as something new to talk about; he had never been accepted. Another Ancient Wrong forbade it - the cleft between the hated and the hating race. He was believed to be a spy (the rumour of an English invasion had kept most of Belmullet sitting up all night); his movements were watched; he was reported to the police and not allowed to leave the mainland; he had joined the local security force, but was asked not to attend parades. His disillusionment may have been rubbed in by the parallel with *The Candle in the Wind*, where Arthur's goodwill is of no avail against his hereditary enemies. Now another winter lay before him, a winter of intellectual loneliness, with only himself to consult, only himself to feed on. He had a roof over his head, a room to be alone in, regular meals, the hedged landscape of County Meath to walk his dog in, nothing much to complain of, nothing to go on with. War had imprisoned him in a padded cell.

It was his own salvation he leaped at.

On December 6th, he wrote to L. J. Potts, formerly his tutor at Cambridge, continuously his Father Confessor in Letters: 'The next volume is to be called *The Candle in the Wind* (one has to add D.V. nowadays) . . . It will end on the night before the last battle, with Arthur absolutely wretched. And after that I am going to add a new 5th volume, in which Arthur rejoins Merlyn underground (it turns out to be the badger's sett of Vol. 1) and the animals come back again, mainly ants and wild geese. Don't squirm. The inspiration is godsent. You see, I have suddenly discovered that (1) the central theme of *Morte d'Arthur* is to find an antidote to war, (2) that the best way to examine the politics of man is to observe him, with



Aristotle, as a political animal. I don't want to go into all this now, it will spoil the freshness of the future book, but I have been thinking a great deal, in a Sam Butlerish way, about man as an animal among animals - his cerebrum, etc. I think I can really make a comment on all these futile isms (communism, fascism, conservatism, etc.) by stepping back - right back into the real world, in which man is only one of the innumerable other animals. So to put my "moral" across (but I shan't state it), I shall have the marvellous opportunity of bringing the wheel full circle, and ending on an animal note like the one I began on. This will turn my completed epic into a perfect fruit, "rounded off and bright and done."

On the same day he wrote to Garnett, asking what book it was in which Garnett alleged having read that Malory raided a convent, and continuing, 'So far as I can see, my fifth volume is going to be all about the anatomy of the brain. It sounds odd for Arthur, but it is true. Do you happen to know, off hand, of a pretty elementary but efficient book about brain anatomy in *animals, fish, insects, etc.*? I want to know what sort of cerebellum an ant has, also a wild goose. You are the sort of person who would know this.'

Though White uses the future tense in his letter to Potts, it is unlikely that he waited from November 14th to December 6th before beginning *The Book of Merlyn*. Book 5, taking up where the original Book 4 ended, has an immediacy of plain statement that could not have brooked much delay. Arthur is still sitting alone in his tent at Salisbury, awaiting his last battle in the final insolvency of his hopes, and weeping the slow tears of old age. When Merlyn enters to renew their former master-pupil relationship and sees the extent of Arthur's misery, he is not sure whether he can do so at this late hour. His assurance that legend will perpetuate Arthur and the Round Table long after history has mislaid them falls on inattentive ears. He invokes their past relationship. The pupil has outgrown the master and puts him off with a *Le roy s'avisera*. Nowhere in the four previous volumes had White made Arthur so much a king as in this portrayal of him defeated. In *Farewell Victoria*, his novel of the early thirties, he hit on the phrase 'the immortal generals of defeat.' In the

first chapter of *The Book of Merlyn* he substantiated it.

But the scheme of Book 5 is to take Arthur underground, where the animals of Book 1 are waiting to talk to him, and where Merlyn is to subject him to the contents of White's notebook so that he may discover what can be learned from animals about the abolition of war.

Since animals avoid warring with their kind, this could be a good subject to examine.

But the discussion is slanted from the first by Merlyn's insistence on the inferiority of man. *Liber scripus proferetur* . . . Merlyn has opened White's notebook, and finds small evidence that man deserves to be placed among the two thousand eight hundred and fifty species of mammalian animals in the world. They know how to behave befittingly, existing without war or usurpation. Man does not. Merlyn weakens the denunciation by adding the insult that man is a parvenu.

At this point no one present is impious enough to suggest that man may do better in time.

At a later stage of the discussion Arthur, the representative of the parvenu species, suggests that man has had a few good ideas, such as buildings and arable fields. He is put in his place by the achievements of coral animals, beavers, seed-carrying birds, and finally felled with the earthworm, so much esteemed by Darwin. The distinction between performing and planned performance is not allowed to occur to him, and the conversation sweeps on to nomenclature: *Homo ferox* (*sapiens* being out of the question), *Homo stultus*, *Homo impoliticus*. The last is the most damning; man must remain savage and dunderheaded till, like the other mammalian species, he learns to live peaceably.

It is easy to pick holes in White's rhetoric. *The Book of Merlyn* was written with the improvidence of an impulse. It holds much that is acute, disturbing, arresting, much that is brilliant, much that is moving, besides a quantity of information. But Merlyn, the main speaker, is made a mouthpiece for spleen, and the spleen is White's. His fear of the human race, which he seemed to have got the better of, had recurred, and was intensified into fury, fury against the

human race, who make war and glorify it.

No jet of spleen falls on the figure of Arthur. Whenever he emerges from the torrent of instruction, he is a good character: slow to anger, willing to learn, and no fool. He is as recuperable as grass, and enjoys listening to so much good talk. When Merlyn tells him that to continue his education he must become an ant, he is ready and willing. Magicked into an ant, he enters the ants' nest which Merlyn keeps for scientific purposes. What he sees there is White's evocation of the totalitarian state. Compelled by his outward form to function as a working ant, he is so outraged by the slavish belligerence and futility of his fellow workers that he opposes an ant army in full march, and has to be snatched away by Merlyn.

For his last lesson White consigns him to what by then must have seemed an irrecoverable happiness: the winter of 1938 when he went goose shooting.

It is an insight into how many experiences White packed into his days and how vividly he experienced them that little more than two years had elapsed between *Grief for the Grey Geese* and *The Book of Merlyn*. He had taken the goose book with him when he went to fish in Ireland, and Chapter 12 of *The Book of Merlyn* opens with its description of the dimensionless dark flatness of the Lincolnshire Wash and the horizontal wind blowing over it. But now it is Arthur, become a goose, who faces the wind and feels the slob under his webbed feet, though he is not completely a goose as he has yet to fly. When the flock gathers and takes off for the dawn flight, he rises with it.

The old patch shames the new garment. In that winter of two years before, White was at the height of himself, braced against an actual experience, his senses alert, his imagination flaring like a bonfire in the wind. 'I am so physically healthy,' he wrote to Sydney Cockerell, 'that I am simply distended with sea-air and icebergs and dawn and dark and sunset, so hungry and sober and wealthy and wise, that my mind has gone quite to sleep.'

At Doolistown his mind was insomniac, vexed, and demanding. It allowed him to extend the vitality of the old

patch over the few pages where Arthur watches the geese. But with Chapter 13 the intention to convince drives out the creative intention to state, and with but one intermission - when the hedgehog leads Arthur to a hill in the west-country, where he sits looking at his sleeping kingdom under the moon and is reconciled to the bad because of the good - the book clatters on like a factory with analysis, proof and counterproof, exhortation, demonstration, explanation, historical examples, parables from nature - even the hedgehog talks too much.

Yet the theme was good, and timely, and heartfelt, and White preserves an awareness of persons and aerates the dialectics with traits of character and colloquial asides. It is clear from the typescript that he recognized the need for this, for many of these mitigations were added by hand. Whenever he can escape from his purpose - no less aesthetically fell for being laudable - into his rightful kingdom of narrative, *The Book of Merlyn* shows him still master of his peculiar powers. It is as though the book were written by two people: the storyteller and the clever man with the notebook who shouts him down.

Perhaps he went astray in that stony desert of words and opinions because he lacked his former guide. In the final chapter, Malory has returned. Under his tutelage White tells how, after Arthur's death in battle, Guenever and Lancelot, stately abbess and humble hermit, came to their quiet ends. These few pages are among the finest that White ever wrote. Cleverness and contention and animus are dismissed: there is no place for them in the completed world of legend, where White and Malory stand farewelling at the end of the long journey that began by lamplight in the gamekeeper's cottage at Stowe Ridings.

This is the true last chapter of *The Once and Future King*, and should have its place there. Fate saw otherwise. 'I have suddenly discovered that . . . the central theme of Morte d'Arthur is to find an antidote to war.' To give weight to his discovery by making it seem less sudden, White incorporated new material into the already published three volumes. In November 1941 he sent them, together with *The Candle in*

*the Wind* and *The Book of Merlyn*, to his London publisher, to be published as a whole. Mr. Collins was disconcerted. He replied that the proposal would need thinking over. So long a book would take a great deal of paper. The prosecution of war made heavy demands on the paper supply: forms in triplicate, regulations, reports, instructions to civilians, light reading for forces, etc. White insisted that the five books should appear as a whole. After prolonged negotiations, in the course of which White's demand to see *The Book of Merlyn* in proof escaped notice - a grave pity, for he was accustomed to rely on print to show up what was faulty or superfluous - the fivefold *Once and Future King* was laid by.

*The Once and Future King* was not published till 1958. It was published as a tetralogy. *The Book of Merlyn*, that attempt to find an antidote to war, had become a war casualty.



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