



Percy F. Westerman and his son J.F.C. Westerman: The Origin of a Collection

Dennis Butts 2008

During the 1960s, while working on a Bodley Head monograph of Robert Louis Stevenson, I began thinking about the origins of the British Boys' Adventure Story. Where had it come from? How had it changed and developed? Who were the most interesting practitioners?

One name that came up fairly frequently was Percy F. Westerman. This prolific author of boys' adventure stories seemed to have written around 170 books - historical romances from the school of G.A.Henty, realistic tales of modern war, and a whole series about 'Standish' of the Flying Police, some of which I dimly remembered reading in my own schooldays in the 1940s. Westerman seemed to have flourished in the first half of the twentieth century, absolutely dominating the period roughly from the death of Henty in 1902 to the rise of W.E. Johns and his stories about 'Biggles' in the 1930s. In a referendum run by the Daily Sketch in the 1930s he had been voted the most popular boys' author, and was the subject of a film made by Pathé Gazette. At his death in 1959 the Times said that his total sales were 1,599,000.

Yet, apart from these basis facts, very little seemed to be known about Westerman or his works. There was no reference to him in R.L. Green's (admittedly selective) *Tellers of Tales* (1946), and only two passing references in Geoffrey Trease's *Tales Out of School* (1948). Marcus Crouch's *Treasure Seekers and Borrowers* (1962) did a little better, and actually mentioned three of Westerman's titles. But this raised the question of exactly how many books Westerman actually wrote. In the absence of any bibliography, I began the tedious process of compiling a checklist based upon my own copies and catalogues in the British Library and elsewhere. But other questions kept cropping up. How and when did Westerman begin writing? What was his background? To what extent did his stories depend upon experience or the imagination?

I finally struck lucky with my searches in 1967 when, in response to a letter sent to Westerman's widow at an address supplied by his main publisher Blackie, I received a letter from Westerman's only son, Major J. F.C. Westerman. Although apologising for his handwriting, Major Westerman wrote me a long and detailed letter about his father, and invited me to visit him at his home in Dorset. Subsequent letters and visits followed.

Major Westerman was a delightful person, blessed with a sympathetic manner, a good memory and considerable gifts as a raconteur. He was an only child, and after leaving school had actually served in the army, in the newly established Royal Flying Corps, and then the Royal Navy at different times in his career. He had also written boys' adventure stories very much in the style of his father - about a dozen all told.

He told me how his father had failed in his ambition to join the Royal Navy because of poor eyesight so, after leaving Portsmouth Grammar School, he obtained a post as a clerk in the dockyards. He had begun writing articles about sailing and cycling in his spare time to supplement his salary. He wrote his first book *A Lad of Grit* (1909) as the result of a bet with his wife, and from then on he

never looked back. He sometimes wrote three or four books in a year, always in longhand before having them typed up. All his life he enjoyed sailing and yachting, but, apart from a trip to the Channel Islands, never actually went abroad. All his descriptions of foreign lands were based upon research. A stickler for discipline, as a member of the Home Guard in World War II, he always insisted on saluting his son, when Major J. F. C. Westerman came home on leave. (A fuller account of Percy F. Westerman's career can now be found in my entry in the new Oxford Dictionary of Biography.)

But Major Westerman was planning to move on. In his late sixties when I first met him, he was widowed and living on his own in a cottage in Winterborne Zelstone. Like his father, a keen sailor all his life, Major Westerman had bought a converted motor-torpedo boat with which he planned to sail away to the Mediterranean. 'I want to see the Greek Islands once more before I die,' he told me. So he was clearing his cottage of all his unwanted belongings, and insisted on presenting me with numerous souvenirs of his father, the great Percy F. Westerman. What could I do? I reluctantly accepted them. We stayed in touch for a few more months - but then silence – and when I returned to Winterborne Zelstone the next year, he had gone. New owners had moved into his cottage. They knew about Major Westerman. 'Yes, he had reached the Mediterranean,' they said, because he had sent a postcard to their neighbours. But they had heard nothing from him since. I hoped that he had found the Land of the Lotos Eaters.

Checklist of Percy F. Westerman Collection

I. Typescripts

Dual Control

84 page typescript (in green card cover with front missing) of part of a naval story

featuring Kenneth Raxworthy R.N., undated, with the typed title, and written in blue pencil *Midshipman Raxworthy - Part IV*. (A story called *Midshipman Raxworthy* was published by Blackie in 1936.)

(20,000 words.)

A Mystery of the Java Sea

396 page typescript (bound in green card covers) of an adventure story featuring young Leslie Wyndham, beginning with a shipwreck off the Dorset coast and finishing in Java. There are some signs of editing in green ink. The card cover bears notes in green ink saying 'Ready for the Press' and 'Better Title wanted.' But two attached notes express concern about Westerman's picture of Malaya one saying -'A very good story - but written between the Wars, depicting Malaya in a way quite out of date. Could the first part be rewritten. April 1952.'

(85,000 words)

The Stamford Bridge Mystery

262 page typescript (bound in green card covers) about some sea scouts solving a murder mystery in Yorkshire. But a pencilled note on the cover reads 'Postponed sine die...see Reader's report, June 35.' (Perhaps it was too adult and complicated for a boy's story?) The title page is signed 'Percy F. Westerman, The Barge, Wareham, Dorset.'

(65,780 words)

Delivered by Air

229 page typescript (in green card covers) of a flying story about the hero Roy Croxley being hired to deliver a carving to China. The book has been edited for printing, mainly in green ink. A hand-written note on the cover 'Ready for Press. A 'Far Eastern Airways' story of air adventure in China. January 1939.3/6 size.'

(52,670 words)

The Peril of the Air (I)

189 page typescript (in green card covers) - a sea story about three young sailors' adventures when war breaks out between Russia and Britain. There has been a little editing.

(19, 500 words)

The Peril of the Air (2)

397 page typescript (in green card covers) telling how the Russian invasion was defeated , partly by an English fog and a great storm as in the days of the Armada. But a long pencilled note on the cover indicates anxieties about Westerman's political analysis, especially pages 239,240 and283. The note adds -'Before this book is put on the list (?) the situation must be reconsidered: Russia is here shown as the "villain of the piece" Dec 1935.' A green ink note adds 'The author agreed that it would be best to keep this in cold storage. June 35.' Another note on the cover says, 'Passed for Press - save for consideration of the Russian question...'

(95, 000 words)

The Gates of the Kwai-Nan

94 pages of typescript (in green card covers) of a naval story of British sailors dealing with bandits in China. A hand-written note on the fly-leaf reads: 'A stirring tale of work by British ... against bandits in China. Descriptions of scenes and actions are good. February 1933.'

(22, 500 words)

Captain Blundell's Treasure

74 pages of typescript (in green card covers) of a play based upon the novel of the same name published by Blackie in 1927. A letter from Major Westerman (15.7.68) says the story was 'dramatised by my father for the Wareham Dramatic Society of that time. He also dramatised another of his books for the same society – *King for a Month...*'

N.B. With all these typescripts is a brief letter from Blackie returning them to Mrs. Westerman on August 18th, 1959. This suggests that none of the scripts was published, and that Dual Control was perhaps an episode cut from *Midshipman Raxworthy*.

II. Scrapbooks

No. 1

This consists of 56 pages of a large blue scrapbook with the covers split. The book contains pasted-in articles by Percy F. Westerman of his early journalism. Many are about 'The Solent and its Harbours,' published in *The Motor Boat* magazine between February and June 1906. Others, about cycling to various parts of Britain, such as the New Forest and the Yorkshire Dales, were published in the magazine *Hobbies* in the early months of 1906, although two articles from the magazine *Cycling* seem to have been published in 1901.

No.2

This consists of 43 pages with split red boards. It seems to follow on chronologically from Scrapbook No. 1, and contains examples of Westerman's early journalism with many articles and photographs about sailing and yachting, which appeared in such magazines as *The Motor Boat* and *Yachting Weekly* from early 1907 to early 1908.

No.3

This consists of 42 pages in split red boards. Pasted in at the beginning is a collection of approximately 38 brightly-coloured book-jackets to many of Westerman's books, such as *Winning His Wings*, etc. The scrapbook continues Westerman's practice of pasting in copies of his early journalism from late 1908 through 1909, mainly articles about sailing from *The Motor Boat* and, *Yachting Weekly*, though there are two articles from the *Boys' Own Paper*. Towards the end of this scrapbook Westerman has pasted in a considerable number of reviews or notices of his books, sent by the General Cuttings Association,

including, for example, reviews of such books as *Dreadnought of the Air* and *The Log of a Snob*. These are dated 1913-1914.

No.4

This consists of 42 pages in split and detached blue boards, containing many photographs of such places as Falmouth, Fowey, the Lizard, Plymouth, Southampton and Truro. This album also contains the family photograph of Percy F. Westerman posing in the stocks at Lanteglos Church near Fowey in Cornwall.

No. 5

This consists of 48 pages in split and detached red boards. The contents are mainly photographs of places in Devon, such as Plymouth and Totnes, as well as family photographs of Westerman and his son 'Jack.' (i.e. J. F. C. Westerman) One photograph of 'Jack' is dated 1917. The album also contains four pages of a remarkable collection of used railway tickets, presumably souvenirs of Westerman's journeys to Bournemouth, Oxford, Waterloo, etc.

III. Miscellaneous

The timetable for the Admiralty entrance examinations in November 1893.

An Admiralty certificate dated 14. 12. 1893 notifying Westerman that he had failed the entrance examination for an Assistant Clerkship in the Royal Navy.

A list of Westerman's unsuccessful examination results from the Admiralty.

A hand-written note from Westerman about a Boy Scout Troop dated 6/14/44.

Sugar ration cards for Mr. and Mrs. Westerman - undated, presumably WWII.

N.B. Dennis Butts has retained the correspondence between him and Major Westerman dated 1967-68, and two of his father's books which were presented by Major Westerman.

Dennis Butts, 219 Church Road, Earley, READING RG6 1HW (31.10.2007)