

Foreword

Many books have been written about the horror of boys' public schools. Comparatively few, however, venture beyond the staff-room door to examine the suffering of masters as well as pupils. Of those that do, there is probably none that captures the wretchedness of their cloistered life more vividly than *Mr Perrin and Mr Traill*.

In Moffatt's, on the stormy coast of Cornwall, Hugh Walpole created an institution which would drive any man to the depths of despair – if not to the point of murder. Its poisonous atmosphere derives from the crafty, bullying headmaster, the Revd Moy-Thompson, who preaches *esprit de corps* while pursuing a relentless policy of divide and rule. But to Walpole, writing in 1910, the place was not exceptional: indeed, he saw it as representative of thousands of second-rate public schools – 'places where men are underpaid, with no prospects, herded together, all of them hating each other, wanting, perhaps, towards the end of term, to cut each others' throats'.

The book opens with our first sight of one such man: Vincent Perrin. The Michaelmas term may only just be beginning, but he is already close to the edge.

Known to the boys as 'Pompous', Mr Perrin is gaunt, shabby and middle-aged. After more than twenty years at Moffatt's, his dreams of making something of his life have all but vanished. The only glimmer of hope comes in the shape of Isabel Desart – a beautiful, intelligent young woman who makes regular trips from London to stay with Perrin's colleague Mr Comber and his wife. If he can only win Miss Desart's love, Perrin believes, a brilliant career at Eton or Harrow could still be his.

But the coming of a new young master highlights the absurdity of Perrin's aspirations. Archie Traill, fresh from Cambridge, is everything that Perrin is not – athletic, handsome and easy-going. When Perrin realises that he has a

rival for Isabel's affection, he conceives a hatred of Traill which becomes all-consuming; and when her preference becomes clear, the terrible consequences are felt throughout the school.

Walpole's title has immediate echoes of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and though *Mr Perrin and Mr Traill* is less fantastic than Robert Louis Stevenson's novel, it is also concerned with criminal schizophrenia. For while their colleagues see only the conflict between the two teachers, there is a further struggle going on inside Mr Perrin's head. One half of his personality is 'a rather fine one, with a great desire to do the right thing'; the other is 'the ill-tempered, pompous, sarcastic, bitter Mr Perrin. When Perrin No 1 was uppermost, he recognised and deeply regretted Perrin No 2; but when Perrin No 2 was in command he saw nothing but a spiteful and indignant world trying, as he phrased it, to "do him down"'. Walpole's success in making Perrin at once hateful and pitiable is perhaps the most impressive aspect of the book.

Walpole – whose forebears included the eighteenth-century Prime Minister and his novelist son Horace – was born in New Zealand, but experienced British public schools as both a pupil and a teacher. He was only nine when his clergyman father, who had taken a teaching post at a seminary in New York, sent him across the Atlantic to a boarding school in Truro. His time there was marred by bullying and nightmares, but worse was in store at his next school, where the younger boys were humiliated by their seniors in a nightly ritual known as 'the Circus'.

'Of the two years spent at M. [Marlow] I shall say no more,' Walpole wrote as a Cambridge undergraduate, in a journal which foreshadows *Mr Perrin and Mr Traill*. 'Hell is realised by me for I have shared it. I do not know that I look back on it with real regret – it has taught me much that is bad, but I have learnt sympathy. Every man, who is a man, must have his Hyde, and M. produced mine. The excessive desire to be loved that has always played so an enormous a part in my life was bred largely,

I think, from the neglect I suffered there.’

Life improved once his parents moved him to King’s, Canterbury; and when, after leaving Cambridge, he spent a year teaching at Epsom College, the experience was not especially disagreeable. Nevertheless, it was Epsom – and in particular a petty dispute between two masters during a rainstorm – that inspired *Mr Perrin*. Walpole later described how the idea came to him one afternoon in London on his way to the Court Theatre (now the Royal Court) in Sloane Square:

‘I was in the very middle of the King’s Road when I suddenly saw Mr Perrin staring at me. By the time I reached the Court Theatre, a brief five minutes, the whole of the story was outlined in my mind. It sprang into reality from the Umbrella incident which had actually occurred...While the young, buoyant Mr Traill was what I would have liked to be, the tortured, half-maddened Mr Perrin was what I thought I was.’

He wrote the book in just two months: a remarkable achievement for any author, let alone one aged 26. But Walpole, who had already published two novels, was nothing if not precocious, and *Mr Perrin and Mr Traill* is a book of unusual maturity – most obviously in its confident, gently mocking narrative tone. On its publication, Arnold Bennett (one of the many established writers whom the ambitious Walpole made it his business to cultivate) hailed the emergence of ‘a born and consecrated novelist’ blessed with a ‘powerful gift’.

Walpole certainly had no doubt about his own abilities. In his collection of letters *Performing Flea*, PG Wodehouse tells the following anecdote: ‘I was staying with the Vice-Chancellor at Magdalen and [Hugh Walpole] blew in and spent the day. It was just after Hilaire Belloc had said that I was the best living English writer. It was just a gag, of course, but it worried Hugh terribly. He said to me, ‘Did you see what Belloc said about you?’ I said I had.— ‘I wonder why he said that.’ ‘I wonder,’ I said. Long silence. ‘I can’t imagine why he said that,’ said Hugh.

I said I couldn't, either. Another long silence. 'It seems such an extraordinary thing to say!'— 'Most extraordinary.' Long silence again. 'Ah,well,' said Hugh, having apparently found the solution, 'the old man's getting very old.'

Unfortunately for Walpole, Wodehouse's books have remained in the public consciousness in a way that his own have not. But reading *Mr Perrin and Mr Traill*, it is not hard to see why his contemporaries held him in such esteem. Its strengths include its descriptions of the wild and beautiful Cornish landscape which, with the brooding Gothic atmosphere of Moffatt's, anticipate the works of Daphne du Maurier. The awful dinner party which Mrs Comber gives for Isabel Desart is a brilliantly excruciating set piece, and Walpole shows throughout a penetrating awareness of how the smallest things can have devastating repercussions in a closed community. But it is above all the compelling plot – with a literally cliff-hanging denouement – which guarantees *Mr Perrin's* enduring appeal.

Hugh Walpole was a prolific author, and in the remaining 30 years of his life published at least one book a year. He achieved enormous popularity, above all with the *Herries* series of historical novels set in his adopted county, Cumberland. But in the judgement of his biographer Rupert Hart-Davis, 'Only once [in *The Dark Forest*] was he ever again to recapture the fresh, clear-cut realism of *Mr Perrin*'; and Walpole himself, looking back on his work in 1936, recorded that of all his books, *Mr Perrin and Mr Traill* was the truest.

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