

**John Carey 2009: *William Golding: The Man who Wrote Lord of the Flies*. London: Faber and Faber. x+573 pp. ISBN 978-0-571-23163-8**

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At the end of his detailed biography of William Golding, John Carey remarks that today “mention of *Lord of the Flies* sparks recognition in a way that Golding’s own name does not” (516). This may seem unjust to those who have read the other novels, and Golding himself would have been irritated: when he reread it in 1972, he condemned its “boring and crude” style (cited 363). Still, despite huge public and critical acclaim during most of his career, Golding is remembered chiefly for that one book, which has become a massive cultural influence. This explains the subtitle of the present work.

John Carey had already edited a commemorative volume on the novelist (Carey 1987). In his attempt to show that Golding was much more than a one-hit wonder, he now unearths a wealth of written documents which comprises “unpublished novels . . . early drafts of published novels . . . two autobiographical works . . . and a 5,000-page journal”, together with “the correspondence between Golding and his editor at Faber and Faber, Charles Monteith” (ix). So far this kind of information had only been available through Golding’s own essays and reviews, some of them collected in *The Hot Gates* (1965) and *A Moving Target* (1982), and through such biographical sketches as the one written by his daughter, Judy Carver, and appended to the last edition of Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor’s *Critical Study* (2002). In this respect, Carey’s book fills a significant gap in Golding studies.

The first five chapters focus on Golding’s birth in Newquay, Cornwall, his family and his childhood house in Marlborough, Wiltshire. They also describe his first experiences of the supernatural (including the encounter with a spectral stag not far from the family’s house), as well as Golding’s early terrors, associated with the old house’s cellar and the adjacent cemetery. His father, Alec, was a schoolmaster. He was an atheistic rationalist, a socialist and a pacifist. Mildred, Golding’s mother, had the same views. She tried to inoculate young Billy against irrational superstition by telling him ghost stories, though that only “compounded his supernatural terrors” (16).

In chapters 6 and 7 we learn about Golding’s youth in Marlborough and as an undergraduate at Oxford. Golding went to the school where his father worked as science master. Near their house stood Marlborough College, one of the great public schools in Britain, whose sight would fill William “with hatred and envy” (cited 17). Golding’s lifelong “sense of social inadequacy” and his writing ambitions were rooted, Carey suggests, in his early memories of the college’s masters and pupils (17). He went to Oxford after agreeing to study Natural Sciences to placate his father, but he soon changed to English Literature. There he came into contact with Rudolf Steiner’s *anthroposophy*, a belief system that afforded him a temporary “reconciliation of his father’s scientific rationalism and his own spiritual experiences” (48). Most of all, Oxford taught him “that he was

socially and academically inferior” (62). On leaving Oxford he was interviewed by the university’s appointments committee, for careers advice, and marked down as “[n]ot quite a gentleman” (cited 57). Golding later transformed this continuing feeling of humiliation into one of his most permanent themes.

It was at this time that Golding had his first sexual relationships. In his teens there were two girls that attracted him. One, Dora, seemed sexually willing; but when she resisted his advances he attempted to rape her. William was nineteen and she was fifteen. The other, Mollie, was gentle and chaste. As with Dora, William’s relationship with Mollie involved a certain violence. More than anything else, he “wanted to punish and dominate” the girl (39).

Chapter 8 recounts how Golding drifted for several years, playing the piano and acting. He became a state school teacher, and in 1940 he took up a post at Bishop Wordsworth’s School, Salisbury. In this period he met Ann Brookefield. Though William and Mollie were engaged, he ditched her and married Ann. Ann’s family had Communist Party sympathies. Golding himself was influenced by Marxism, though he never mentioned having read Marx at all. He found Marxism, especially after the war, over-optimistic, but by the early 1970s he still declared himself “[b]itterly left of center” (Biles 1970: 48, emphasis in the original).

At the end of 1940 Golding joined the Royal Navy. His involvement in the Second World War is described in chapter 9. The conflagration came as a devastating revelation. Before the war, he recalled elsewhere, his generation had “a liberal and naive belief in the perfectibility of man”, but in the war they discovered “what . . . the Animal could do to his own species” (Golding 1984: 163). Carey shows how Golding became even more sceptical about his parents’ ideals of progress: “Humanity does not improve. Civilized man externalizes in war what uncivilized man externalizes in personal violence” (cited 220). Besides, in the Navy “he observed a thriving homosexual underworld” (86). Homosexuality was a recurring theme in his novels, and this concern seems to be related to Golding’s awareness of his “divided sexuality” (393). As is evident in his writings, he felt that “what is admired as manliness is often synonymous with destruction”, and “he developed a sympathy with men” that crossed “gender boundaries” (2).

Chapters 10 and 11 are devoted to Golding’s return to Bishop Wordsworth’s School at the end of the war, and to his struggle to become a novelist. While still at Oxford, he had published a volume entitled *Poems*. It was only after the war that he decided “to be a story-teller” (cited 123). In those years he wrote at least three long narrative works, all of which were sent back by publishers.

The next six chapters (12 to 17) cover the period going from the writing of *Lord of the Flies* to the inception of *The Spire*. Initially, Golding’s fourth narrative suffered the same fate as the other three. Undeterred by a number of rejections of the typescript, the author sent it to Faber and Faber. Its first reader there deemed the narrative “[a]bsurd & uninteresting”, and advised against its publication (cited 151). It was then that Charles Monteith intervened. After some “healthy pruning” and a change of title – the definitive one was not Golding’s – Faber gave the work the green light (cited 163). *Lord of the Flies* was received to critical acclaim, and Golding’s ascent on the British literary scene was meteoric.

Chapter 18 follows the novelist on his triumphant lecturing trips to America, in 1961-2 and 1963. They “brought him fame, wealth and the adulation of the young” (252). *Lord of the Flies* had become increasingly popular among them, probably due to its “anti-war tenor”, which ensured its profound impact in the context of the Cold War (267). Encouraged by the novel’s mounting sales, he abandoned teaching, an activity that he disliked and whose objectives he did not fully understand.

Back in Britain, chapters 19 and 20 inform us, he finished *The Spire* and published two more books: a selection of non-fiction entitled *The Hot Gates* and another novel, *The Pyramid*. *The Spire* became a compendium of Golding’s main themes. All of his novels tend to set “two opposed kinds of being against each other” (175), and a related mixture of contrary forces (rational vs. irrational, physical vs. spiritual, good vs. evil) which is described as pervading all human endeavours. This is all symbolised by the spire. One of the most striking characteristics of Golding’s writing was his “distaste for research” (26). His reliance on imagination rather than on technical knowledge accounts for the factual mistakes that appear in some of his novels (Piggy’s glasses in *Lord of the Flies*, for example). However, it also contributed to some of his greatest literary achievements, such as the detailed description of a spire’s erection in *The Spire*. In this, as in his other non-contemporary novels, he used history as his “humble servant – i.e. bent it where necessary” (cited 330). In all cases, his excuse was the privilege of the storyteller, which included not only betraying real facts, but also to be “impenetrable” or “inconsistent” in order to hold the audience’s attention (cited 413). One other thing that looms large in his novels is “his own class consciousness, dating from his resentment of the privileged young gentlemen at Marlborough College” (395). *The Pyramid* is probably his most explicit treatment of the British social structure, which he conceived of as a “social pyramid” (cited 296).

In the mid-sixties two global issues began to engage Golding’s attention – the anti-nuclear movement and ecology. His interest in both came about through his friendship with James Lovelock, propounder of the *Gaia* hypothesis (whose name was suggested by Golding). Concern about the destruction of nature had always been apparent in his fiction, especially in *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors*, and recurred until his death.

Chapters 21 to 24 focus on the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1967 the family’s boat, the *Tenace*, was hit by a Japanese freighter and foundered in the Strait of Dover. The disaster shattered Golding’s confidence. He never sailed again. In 1969 his son David suffered a severe nervous breakdown, which aggravated his father’s anxiety. The result of such personal difficulties was a writing block that lasted until the late 1970s.

Chapters 25 to 27 span from the publication of *Darkness Visible*, in 1979, to that of *A Moving Target*, in 1982. Golding had always had ambivalent feelings towards homosexuality, which his novels often – and wrongly – associate with paedophilia. From *Free Fall* onwards, homosexuals and paedophiles are treated with increasing sympathy. In his hands, a character such as *Darkness Visible*’s Sebastian Pedigree, who is “thought by all to be the wickedest of men”, eventually “proves less harmful than those who thought they held the one truth firmly in both hands” and acted from the highest motives (cited 378). Here as elsewhere, Golding “challenged facile orthodoxies about the relation between good and evil” (cited 325-26).

For Golding, the 1970s and 1980s were years of “chronic worry and indecision” (408). He was concerned about his wife Ann and their son’s health, about money, and, most of all, about his uncertain literary powers. This contrasted with the many honours he received. Among them, in 1983 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The issue is treated in chapter 28. Golding had never liked “being subjected . . . to a close critical examination” (cited 250). For this reason his pleasure, in receiving the Nobel, was partly dimmed by some adverse comments made about it.

The final chapters (29 to 31) offer an account of the author’s last years. In 1988 he was knighted by the Queen. The news was not wholly unexpected. Golding had instructed Monteith to lobby highly placed friends on his behalf. He also entrusted Matthew Evans, Faber’s chairman, with the same mission, and followed up by asking: “Are you cultivating my K?” (cited 485). Sir William Golding died five years later, in 1993.

In the Postscript, Carey attempts to explain some intriguing features of Golding’s personality. At first sight, he was a withdrawn, monogamous ex-teacher who lived quietly in south-west England and set most of his novels in the past. Yet the man Carey presents to us was complicated enough. Like Simon, one of the main characters in *Lord of the Flies*, Golding “was over-sensitive, timid . . . lonely, and imaginative to the point of hallucination”, but he was also extremely “fearful” (29): of adverse criticism, of his own capacity of evil, of the supernatural. This sensitive man once described himself as “a monster in deed, word and thought” (cited 516), and this self-disgust, it seems, lay at the heart of his writing. Another salient aspect of Golding’s character is his profoundly irrational view of reality. He believed that only imagination could penetrate, as *Darkness Visible* expressed it, “the screen that conceals the working of things” (cited 520). Accordingly, he always found it difficult to harmonise this metaphysical and religious bend with his parents’ belief in reason and progress.

Carey also offers detailed summaries of all of the novelist’s published and unpublished works, and explores, with illuminating brush-strokes, the concentration and symbolic richness that emerge through their “protean variety and inventiveness” (516). He equally excels at linking Golding’s works to his life. Most of his books were intended to show humanity’s essence “in a cosmic perspective rather than an everyday social setting” (259). Convinced that literature “is not reportage, but imagination” (Biles 1970: 16), he focused – so it was believed – not on himself or on other real people, but on imagined others, always in search of what all human beings have in common. As Carey’s book demonstrates, however, Golding’s stories and many of his narrators are closely moulded on the author’s personality and in the experiences he had, witnessed or heard about. Many Golding critics have accepted the author’s assertions that there was little of himself in his novels (e.g. Biles 1970: 79-80), even if this entered in contradiction with Golding’s insistence that his novels had very little genesis outside himself (see Baker 1965: 39). Larry L. Dickson, for instance, begins his discussion of *The Paper Men* by stating that Wilfred Barclay, the “aging, mean-spirited, alcoholic English writer” that tells his own story, “is obviously not Golding” (1991: 127). The problem arises when he proceeds to show the similarities between the author and “the despicable Barclay” (128). Golding was, like Barclay, an alcoholic. By the early 1970s, Carey’s biography reveals, he was getting “dead drunk” at least once a week, and he sometimes ended up saying “unforgivable things” to his wife and pulling her about (cited 335). The

last time anyone saw him alive, the Nobel laureate was lying drunk in an empty bathtub, fully clothed but wearing his dressing gown. In his book on Golding, Dickson concludes that in *The Paper Men* Golding “incorporated autobiographical elements that he had previously shunned” (1991: 130). Now Carey proves this view wrong. Golding was always willing to employ real life models in his writings. His father’s prudish attitude to sex and his rationalism served as models for Nick Shales’s in *Free Fall*. Dora, the girl whom Golding attempted to rape, provided the basis for Eve in *The Pyramid*. More interestingly perhaps, Golding took himself as a model. He was very much like Simon in *Lord of the Flies*, yet violent like Jack. Like Simon and the main characters in several other novels, he had difficulties in communicating his experiences, especially of the supernatural. When he went to university, Golding became, like Sammy in *Free Fall*, “a scientific rationalist” who “deduced that good and evil were relative” (45). Like Pincher Martin and Sammy, he had a strong tendency to dominate his girlfriends. And in episode echoing Golding’s relationship with Mollie, Sammy recalls how he ditched Beatrice, whom he was going to marry, and married another girl instead. (Beatrice, like Mollie, subsequently suffered mental problems.) Like many of his male characters, Golding was obsessed with sex and with class distinctions. And like Golding at the end of his life, the Pythia in *The Double Tongue* reaches the conclusion that “on the subject of God or the gods nothing can be known” (510).

One of the advantages of Carey’s treatment is its focus on the way in which the writer’s life was lived at bottom – how much he got for his books, what his editor and the critics thought, and how Golding reacted to their opinions. Carey is especially good on the financial details. His figures show that, from the early 1960s, *Lord of the Flies*, the novel Golding came to despise, allowed the novelist not to work again. It financed his drinking sprees and some long periods of creative idleness as well as his cars, boats, and the purchase of a Cornish manor house.

As often happens with biographies, it is the first half that is more interesting. Due to Golding’s endless British Council tours on five continents, the final chapters run the risk of becoming a mere list of names of famous people – kings and queens, writers, rock stars – and familiar and exotic places. Even so, after wondering what impelled those “marathon journeys”, Carey manages to make a crucial psychological point: “Was it . . . fear of having to face a blank sheet of paper? Or an appetite for applause and publicity which he felt he lacked in England? Perhaps all of these, but there was also . . . a kind of patriotism – showing the flag for Britain” (493). As it turns out, Golding eventually became too much involved in an establishment he apparently despised.

In conclusion, apart from throwing light on such contradictions, Carey’s latest book serves to remind us that Golding is one of the great British novelists of our time. Some of his novels, not just the first, deserve rediscovery, and if they get it, then this biography will be in large measure responsible.

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