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## **John Sommerfield's Box**

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On a summer's evening in 2013, Peter Sommerfield appeared at my door with a cardboard box in his hands. It was only the second time I had met Peter, though we had been in sporadic e-mail contact for months about his father, the writer John Sommerfield. Peter handed over the box, which contained what he described as his father's archive. He wasn't sure whether it would be of interest, but as he was getting old himself he was anxious to secure what he described as his father's legacy. I was enjoined to make what use I could of the box's contents and to find the archive a good home. Within 15 minutes of arriving at my north London doorstep, Peter was gone.

The box is a treasure trove. It contains typescripts of both novels and short stories (some unpublished) and two wonderful notebooks, one dating from Sommerfield's time as a volunteer with the International Brigades in Spain and the other from his wartime service in the RAF. There are photographs particularly from wartime along with some service records (and a remarkable propaganda leaflet apparently issued to demoralise Japanese troops in Burma), a small pen and ink drawing of Sommerfield and scores of review cuttings particularly of his later novels. There's very little personal correspondence, incoming or outgoing (and Peter says the box's contents represent the sum total of his father's papers) and nothing of consequence about Sommerfield's involvement with the Communist Party or association with Mass Observation or his post-war work in documentary film.<sup>1</sup>

Exploring a mystery box of this sort is about as good as it gets for a historian, and there was one heart-stopping moment. At the bottom of a cardboard envelope file was a scrunched up piece of paper, reduced almost to a pipe light. As I opened it out, through the wrinkles and creases emerged a handwritten note dated 6<sup>th</sup> January 1941 and signed 'Dylan'. The address given was Strand Film Company (where Dylan Thomas worked on film scripts for the Ministry of Information) and the letter reads:

Old John,

My first letter, too. After all these pints. It was better than a Pim's [sic] to hear from you, and especially to hear that you'll be in London so thirstily soon. I look forward, my constitution is not so happy. And get me here, will you, TEM. 1891, as quickly as you can once they let you out. We'll make a date straightaway, for that moment. Why can't you desert for a bit? Or is this scrap and scribble bluepencilled? We'll choose a good – qualified – place, but that doesn't mean we won't visit all the qualified bad places too. Glad you liked my winter verses, very quickly produced from my tame Swinburne machine, and don't forget: TEM 1891, or above address, and we'll be quietly noisy together for as long as you like and we can. All my lack of news then. Caitlin sends best love. Send ours to Molly. I'm still helping to produce those things that Beachcomber calls the series of priggish, facetious shorts extolling the virtues of sad girls in unfitting uniforms and the vices of happy thinking, moving, and X-ing – one word I must use. How are you?

Always,

Dylan<sup>2</sup>

Dylan Thomas was at the time 26, and 'old' John Sommerfield was 32. It's almost a parody of what you might expect Thomas to write to a drinking buddy. Peter Sommerfield told me that he remembers being tasked with waking Dylan Thomas and providing him with tea after he had stayed the night at his father's flat in Belsize Gardens. Thomas once commented 'if all the party members were like John Sommerfield, I'd join on the spot'<sup>3</sup> – which may well suggest that Sommerfield was on the drinking wing of the party, as he was.

Delving further, loosely inserted into one of the notebooks was a postcard dated 12<sup>th</sup> December 1947 from George Bernard Shaw, apparently in response to a request from Sommerfield for support for the left-wing literary magazine *Our Time*. Shaw was not minded to oblige:

As to theatres and magazines, it is my business to get money out of them, not to put it in. There are scores of them, all bankrupt

When the war taxation leaves me a few spare pounds to give away they go to the Royal Literary Fund.

Do thou likewise. G.B.S.<sup>4</sup>

*Our Time*, which had been launched in 1941 and achieved considerable success and sales, lost much of its circulation after the war and folded in 1949.

Enticing as these are, the archive is above all an insight into the work of a left-wing literary figure who never quite made the top grade but was an important and innovative novelist and writer of short stories. John Sommerfield (1908-1991) wrote 11 titles: six novels, a booklet-length short novel, a volume of short stories, a book about stage management, a memoir of the Spanish Civil War, and he contributed to a title in the Mass Observation series (a collective venture of which his part authorship was not fully acknowledged). He joined the Communist Party in the early 1930s and remained a member for a quarter-of-a-century, and some of his writings – including

the two titles for which he is best known, *May Day* (1936) and *Volunteer in Spain* (1937) – were shaped by his strong political commitment.

*May Day* is the novel which established Sommerfield's claim to lasting attention. It is also the work which marks him out as a London novelist of importance. The novel was published by the Communist Party's Lawrence & Wishart, and featured a strikingly modernist (and now vanishingly rare) jacket design by Misha Black.<sup>5</sup> The novel is set 'a few years hence', pursuing the lives of a handful of Londoners over three days, building up to a May Day demonstration called by a militant and mass-based Communist Party. When the book was republished almost 50 years after it first appeared, John Sommerfield was prompted to revisit a novel which was not quite as he remembered it:

Novels written in early youth, however they may have seemed to the writer at the time, are best not looked at again in later life.

*May Day* ... turned out not to be the sort of book I'd vaguely remembered it to be; and definitely not the book I'd intended it to be at the time of writing. ...

When I wrote it I'd have probably said that *May Day* was Socialist Realism. Now I'd call it early 30s communist romanticism. I'm not in any way apologising for the book's enthusiastic, simple-minded political idealism. Because it was a genuine idealism. There was a lot of it about then. ...<sup>6</sup>

It would be nice to be able to say that material in John Sommerfield's box related to the writing of *May Day*, but there's nothing at all about it or about Sommerfield's association with the Communist Party in the mid-1930s.

There's little in the archive also about another of John Sommerfield's writings with a London focus – *Trouble in Porter Street*, a novella which was published in pamphlet form in 1939.<sup>7</sup> Sommerfield had been approached to write a manual on how to stage a rent strike, a focus of activity for the Communist Party at that time. He took on the task, but in short story form, basing his account (though he didn't say so in the story) on Slaidburn Street, then a mainly working class cul-de-sac near World's End in Chelsea. The novel is both a guide and Communist propaganda, but it is also a sensitive and warm portrayal of a working-class community, in this case divided between those who worked on the railways and on market stalls. His basic characterisation is enhanced by simple but very effective line drawings by Sommerfield's wife, Molly Moss, an accomplished illustrator. The only item relating to this work in the archive is a cutting from the *Daily Worker* of 23 March 1939, a substantial review of *Porter Street* reproducing two of Moss's drawings. The review is, unsurprisingly, very positive:

There are not many episodes so full of really strong, warm, human material as a tenant's agitation. Somebody was bound to write a story about one before long.

John Sommerfield has been the first. And it is extremely fortunate that his story, "Trouble in Porter Street," has been issued by Fore Publications Ltd at the price of twopence. Most people – even viciously exploited tenants – can at some time afford twopence.

A *Daily Worker* seller is, as the reviewer points out, one of the heroes of the Porter Street rent revolt.

John Sommerfield returned to a London theme in what proved to be his penultimate novel, *North West Five*, published in 1960. This was set in an area of north London he knew well, Gospel Oak and Kentish Town, which are both largely in the NW5 postal district. The story returns to the theme of housing, and particularly the shortage of low-rent accommodation, that Sommerfield addressed in *Trouble in Porter Street* – though he regarded the later work as a much fuller literary portrayal of a London locality.<sup>8</sup> *North West Five* is a pleasant but rather slight novel – about the romance between a young carpenter who has just completed his National Service and a librarian, and the tension that housing difficulties places on their relationship.

In Sommerfield's box, there's a typed script of a radio play Sommerfield wrote based on *North West Five*, entitled 'More Room for Us' and broadcast when the book was still fresh in the bookshops. It was a substantial production with a cast of nine in a broadcast which ran for ninety minutes on the Home Service on Saturday, 13 August 1960. Sommerfield was well connected at Broadcasting House, and a running theme in his last book, *The Imprinted* (1978), is his occasional work for and arguments with the BBC.

The archive offers the greatest scope for exploration of Sommerfield's prowess as a writer of short stories. *The Survivors* (1947), much of which is based on his war service in South Asia, contains some exceptional short stories, and deserves wider attention. Several unpublished stories are included in his papers, but they don't appear to have much to say about his native city. One researcher has already made use of this valuable cache of material, and a publisher has expressed interest in some of the unpublished material.

The archive in its entirety is being deposited, with the eager consent of Peter Sommerfield, at the University of Birmingham. Special Collections at Birmingham has a number of archives donated by left wing writers and poets of the mid-twentieth century, including the papers, or some of the papers of Philip Callow, Edgell Rickword, Randall Swingler and Arnold Rattenbury. Birmingham regards John Sommerfield's papers as an ideal complement to its existing holdings, and by the time you read this, the archive should be safely delivered to its new home.

## Notes

1. An initial listing of the contents of John Sommerfield's archive, along with a selection of documents and photographs, is available online at <http://www.andrewwhitehead.net/john-sommerfield-archive.html> (this and all other sites accessed on 2 March 2014).
2. Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) was at this time married to Caitlin Macnamara. John Sommerfield's second wife was Molly Moss. The letter can be seen online at <http://www.andrewwhitehead.net/john-sommerfield-archive.html>. For Strand Film Company, see the British Film Institute site <http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4ce2b95279fd1>. Beachcomber was the pen name used principally by J.B. Morton for a lighthearted column in the *Daily Express*.
3. Andy Croft, 'Returned Volunteer, the novels of John Sommerfield', *London Magazine*, April-May 1983.

4. George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) – this postcard can also be seen at <http://www.andrewwhitehead.net/john-sommerfield-archive.html>
5. This cover design by Misha Black is among those featured on the London Fictions website <http://www.londonfictions.com/covers.html>.
6. *May Day* was republished by Lawrence & Wishart in 1984 with an introduction by Andy Croft and a new author's note. It has since been republished by London Books in 2010, including the 1984 author's note and with an introduction by John King. John King also wrote about *May Day* in *London Fictions*, edited by Andrew Whitehead and Jerry White and published by Five Leaves in 2013.
7. For a detailed account of *Trouble in Porter Street*, see the present writer's article on the London Fictions website – the full text of the 1939 edition of *Porter Street* (it was republished in slightly amended form in 1954) is embedded in this page <http://www.londonfictions.com/john-sommerfield-trouble-in-porter-street.html>.
8. Letter from John Sommerfield to Andrew Whitehead, 8 December 1986.

### **John Sommerfield: principal publications**

*They Die Young*, 1930 – published in the United States as *The Death of Christopher*

*Behind the Scenes*, 1934

*May Day*, 1936

*Volunteer in Spain*, 1937

*Trouble in Porter Street*, 1939, revised edition published in 1954

part author of Mass Observation's *The Pub and the People: a Worktown study*, 1943

*The Survivors*, 1947

*The Adversaries*, 1952

*The Inheritance*, 1956

*North West Five*, 1960

*The Imprinted*, 1978

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