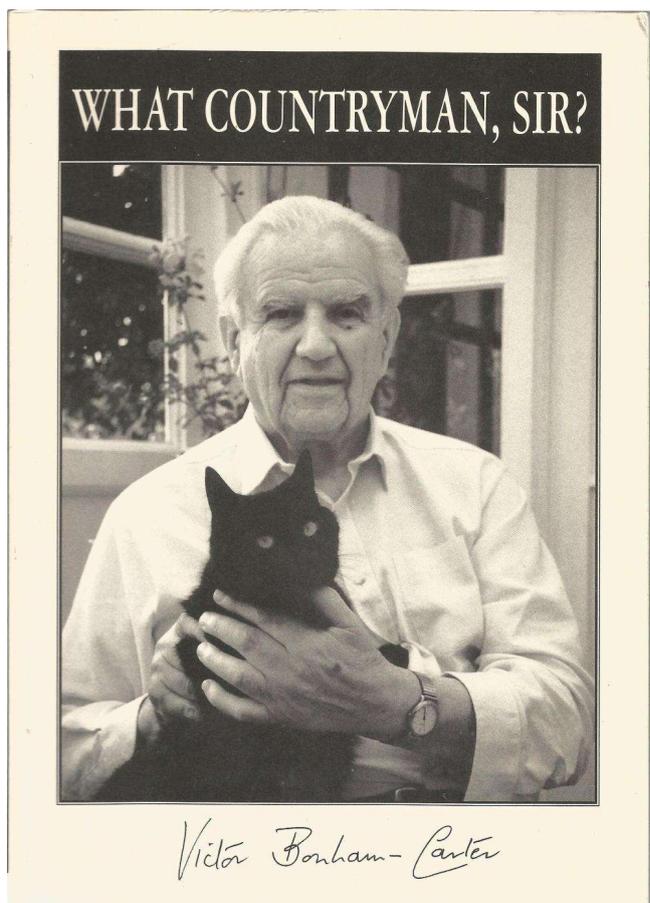


VICTOR BONHAM CARTER



Victor Bonham Carter was born in Maidstone, Kent in 1913. His Bonham Carter ancestors were well-known Whig and Liberal politicians and his father an army officer, who ended up as Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Malta at the beginning of the Second World War. Victor published a family history, *In a Liberal Tradition*, in 1960. His father's work meant frequent moves. Victor was moved to Greenham Common then to Turkey before starting school at Winchester. His mother was a pianist and at school he took a keen interest in music. He loved to sing and his voice training later stood him in good stead as a broadcaster. However, he decided not to take a career in music but went to Cambridge to read history, with a gap year in pre-war Germany first. At Cambridge he spent most of his time studying French and German, then switching to Rural Economy in his final year. He had become concerned about

the rapid development of the countryside and lack of planning.

After university, Victor spent a brief spell as a schoolmaster at Shrewsbury before becoming sub-editor of *The Countryman*, the rural quarterly magazine, then based in the Cotswolds. In 1937 he moved to London to become director of School Prints Ltd., art educational publishers making works of art accessible to the public. There he married Audrey Stogdon. After the birth of their first child they set up home at **Inkpen** on the Berkshire Downs, not far from Victor's former home at Greenham. There they built a farmhouse. Audrey took naturally to keeping stock and gardening. Victor spent the war in the Army, first in the Royal Berkshire Regiment, serving some of his time in Northern Ireland, and then in German Operational Intelligence at the War Office, where his knowledge of German was put to good use.

At the end of the war Victor began to revive School Prints, but all the time was yearning for life in the countryside. At Inkpen he became more involved in village life as Parish and County Councillor. He was much influenced by the writing of CS Orwin, a frequent contributor to *The Countryman* and known on Exmoor as author of *The Reclamation of Exmoor Forest*. Orwin's work *Country Planning* guided his work as a Councillor in promoting the rural economy. At the same time he became involved in broadcasting on country matters and writing. A friendship with German book illustrator Hellmuth Weissenborn

resulted in a children's book and a collection of countryside verse. Hellmuth later painted the jacket for an edition of SH Burton's *Exmoor*.

The 1947 Agriculture Act combined with the Town and Country Planning Act the same year convinced the Bonham Carters that there was a future in farming and the countryside. They gave up their smallholding at Inkpen to buy a farm, finding they had to move to the West Country to discover one they could afford. This turned out to be the 132 acre Langaller Farm at Brushford, a dairy farm, which Victor and Audrey supplemented by pigs and poultry. Starting the business, buying stock and modernising the farm was 'a fearful struggle' as Victor put it. They joined the Soil Association and applied organic principles to the farm but found it economically impossible to fund the labour-intensive farming necessary to go fully organic. Much was learned about farming from the locals they employed.

In 1956 Victor and Audrey moved to East Anstey, putting in a farm manager at Langaller before eventually selling the farm. Whilst at Langaller, Victor had continued to write and had a prolific output of countryside articles for magazines, including *The Countryman* and *The Illustrated London News*. He wrote on planning matters and also on other countryside writers. After giving up farming he returned to broadcasting and writing radio scripts for the BBC's West of England Home Service, based at Bristol. In 1951 he wrote the script for a programme about Dartington Hall. This led to a 15 year commission by the Dartington Hall Trustees to write a history of the rural arts and crafts enterprise since its conception in 1925. Before taking up this commission he wrote *The English Village* for Penguin, which in turn led to further commissions and a further three books: *Farming the Land*, *Exploring Parish Churches* and *The Survival of the English Countryside*. Research into his family history led to the publication of *Soldier True*, a work about the First World War.

Whilst at East Anstey, Victor served for six years on both the Somerset and Joint Committees of Exmoor National Park. He became frustrated with the inability of the Committees to tackle the problem of moorland reclamation and the proposal to plant The Chains with conifers. It was that which made him join the Exmoor Society in the early 1960s. He felt that the Society, although with even less power, was more able to speak out and inform the public about the moorland issue. At the time he was employed by the Society of Authors, a steady income necessary to supplement his freelance work. He became the Society's archivist, resulting in a two volume work on the history of writing since the introduction of printing: *Authors by Profession*. Through his work with the Society of Authors, he became Secretary of the Royal Literary Fund in 1966.

In 1976 Victor and Audrey left East Anstey for a temporary return to dairy farming with their son, Graeme, at Chipstable. The stress of farming took its toll on relationships. Two years later Graeme and his family set sail for Canada and Victor and Audrey divorced, both shortly remarrying. Victor married Cynthia Sanford, whom he had first met ten years earlier. She came from a literary family and worked for the National Book League, then the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association. They bought a house at Milverton and for a while commuted from their work in London to Milverton at weekends before settling there.

Victor had become Chairman of the Exmoor Society in 1964. He was instrumental in commissioning Geoffrey Sinclair to map the remaining moorland on Exmoor and estimate

the rate at which it was being lost. Geoffrey's figures caused controversy: the Ministry of Agriculture and County Councils broadly accepting them and the farmers and landowners disputing them. Lord Porchester's Report, following a government enquiry, broadly supported the Exmoor Society's work and conclusions. Victor supported both farming and the protection of the landscape and was an advocate of agri-environment schemes. In 1975 he became President of the Exmoor Society, a position that he maintained until his death. He was editor or co-editor of the Society's magazine, *The Exmoor Review*, for thirty years.

In 1969 Victor set up the 'cottage' publishing firm, the *Exmoor Press*, with his friend SH 'Tim' Burton. Tim was a teacher at Tiverton, then a lecturer in education. His book, *Exmoor*, remains a classic on the subject and was later updated by Victor. The aim of the new business was to fill the gap in modern literature about Exmoor. The office and store were set up at Tim's house in Dulverton. They recruited experts in various aspects of Exmoor to write 'Microstudies'. The experts were not necessarily writers but Victor and Tim were able to use their skills as editors. Between 1970 and 1989 they published 25 titles, the most popular of which was Tim's own *Lorna Doone Trail*. Jack Hurley's *Rattle His Bones*, an account of local workhouses, won national acclaim and is still much quoted. Tim left Dulverton and Victor made Paul Hodder-Williams, Chairman of Hodder and Stoughton, his new partner. For a while Paul's Exmoor house became office and store, until Cynthia replaced him as partner, operating from home at Milverton. They sold the business to Steven Pugsley in 1989. Steven soon commissioned Victor to write a hardback *The Essence of Exmoor*.

Victor never really gave up writing. When he was 80 he was commissioned by the Dartington Trust to update the history that he had finished thirty years before. Much had to be given up when infirmity confined him to his house, but he was an author, supporter and encourager of other writers and ambassador for Exmoor to the end. His own autobiography, *What Countryman, Sir?*, published privately in 1996, ended with the words: "but when the tap on the shoulder comes, there must be no regrets for, 'like all chimney sweepers, we come to dust'." Victor died in March 2007.
