

Westerman Seminar 14-15 February 2014. Wareham.

**Wild Cornwall: Cornwall as a Landscape for adventure in the writing of Percy F
Westerman**

Slide 1 – title

Background

When Nigel asked me if I would do anything at this event the initial response was ‘no, no more work for a bit’. But we all know how irresistible he is and I had a ghost of an idea. We all also know that with even a ghost of an idea we are doomed because it is impossible to let it go until something is done with it.

The opaque idea was that since Cornwall crops up as a setting, either real or imagined, in several of Westerman’s stories, is it necessary for the location of the story to be Cornwall and if so why? What does Cornwall represent in these stories? (Declare interest in Cornwall).

The brief investigation is divided into three sections, Background, The Wider Picture, and Cornwall Real and Imagined. I’ll take them in that order.

Firstly, Background information:

Slide 2

There are nine stories in which Cornwall features, in work ranging from 1912 – 1951. Cornwall is therefore a constant location throughout Westerman’s writing. The titles in chronological order are:

The Flying Submarine	1912	adventure
The Quest of the Golden Hope	1912	coast only mentioned
Rival Submarines	1913	coast with some landing
The Scouts of Seal Island	1913	adventure
Sea Scouts of the Petrel	1914	coast but integral
The Submarine Hunters	1918	coast but integral
The Pirate Submarine	1923	not read

Missing Believed Lost 1949 coast only mentioned

Working their Passage 1951 not read

From these nine titles, two contain adventures to which Cornwall is an essential location, *The Flying Submarine, 1912* and *The Scouts of Seal Island, 1913*. On two others, *Sea Scouts of the Petrel, 1914* and *The Submarine Hunters, 1918* the adventure is ship based but the coast of Cornwall is essential to the action. In three titles, *The Quest of the Golden Hope, 1912*, *Rival Submarines, 1913* and *Missing Believed Lost, 1951* the Cornish coast is mentioned as the ships pass, although in *Rival Submarines* there is one brief landing and some time spent sitting on the bed of the Tamar.

The final two titles, *The Pirate Submarine, 1923* and *Working their Passage, 1951* I was not able to get hold of to read.

Note also that scouts or sea scouts feature as integral to two of the stories where the main protagonist is the ubiquitous 16 year old patrol leader who is present in so many of Westerman's stories. In most of the other stories, the main characters are also boys between fourteen and sixteen. (Exception – *Flying Submarine* – protagonist twenty “with boyish expression” p. 9 denoting readiness for adventure, but old enough to work for the relevant Government Department.) This description from *The Scouts of Seal Island* provides the character well-known to Westerman readers:

“Dick Atherton was a good specimen of a British schoolboy. He was sixteen years of age, fairly tall, and with long supple limbs and a frame that showed promise of filling out. ...”

And Dick's athleticism is attributed to “Plenty of outdoor exercise ...”¹ p. 9 SSI

From the start of all the stories, Westerman establishes his orientation toward nature and the ‘outdoors’ as a good influence, health-giving, to be enjoyed and to be preserved.

In the context of scouting and of being beneficial to youth, health and character development, Westerman views the natural world holistically, that is, he represents the external (natural) world of his stories as a place that needs to be negotiated thoughtfully but can be survived. Difficulties can be “surmounted by patience, determination and a certain amount of pluck.”²

¹ Westerman, *The Scouts of Seal Island*. 1913. p. 9.

² Westerman, *Sea Scouts of the Petrel*. 1914. p. 11.

SSP p. 11. Westerman portrays the need to work with nature, to blend in with the natural, outdoor, environment sufficiently to preserve life.

Therefore, if we were to examine these works from an ecocritical perspective, we find that Westerman's orientation in these works is towards exploring "the relationship of human culture and the physical world,"³ the boys interact with the physical world continually, in these instances, predominantly with an inhospitable coast and sea.

Slide 3 Exterior world

One clear example of this interaction is found in *The Sea Scouts of the Petrel*. The Gosport Sea Scouts have the good fortune to be given a yacht which they have to board in Falmouth harbour and sail back to Gosport. The episodic nature of their journey finds them involved in a number of setbacks or minor adventures, one of which is to assist the Mevagissey Sea Scouts in their operation of a rocket apparatus "lately presented by a Cornish gentleman in London." SSP p. 106. The Sea Scouts are anxious to prove themselves worthy of the responsibility when called upon to use the apparatus to save sailors from a second wreck off Mevagissey, the Life Boat having gone to the assistance of the first casualty on a wild stormy night. The rescue not only involves correct and expert use of the rocket apparatus but also the ability to negotiate a steep cliff by rope in order to rescue the last man. The success of their action, agility and steadiness left Mr Tretheway, the Mevagissey Sea Scout master "greatly elated" because as he said to his colleague "This night's work proves that we are worthy of the trust laid upon us" SSP p 113. Such negotiation with the elements also helped to cause critics of the movement, such as the fictitious Cornish gentleman, Silas Gwinneer, encountered by 201st North London Troop in *The Scouts of Seal Island*, to rethink their hostile opinion.

(Reflection of Westerman's personal encounters with hostility to the movement?)

Slide 3a Interior world

As well as the influence of the natural world in the form of the exterior landscape, Westerman advocates the benefits of interaction with the natural world on the boys' interior landscape. That is, on the development of character, intelligence, initiative and resourcefulness. In the creation of the scouting ideal of mind and character, the exterior

³ Glotfelty *Introduction* p.xix-xx in Glotfelty, Cheryll and Fromm, Harold eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens and Lonon: The University of Georgia Press, 1996.

landscape is represented as an aid to taming, controlling, blending in with and understanding the potential wild and difficult places in the mind and character that can hinder not only survival in difficult cultural or social terrain but individual difficulties in the 'terrain' of life.

Slide 3b quote

The statement that “we dwell always in two landscapes internal and external and that stories bring those two together”⁴ is demonstrated in Westerman’s conscious recorded emphasis on the benefit of ‘the outdoors’ to the scouts intellectual and character development.

Not only did scouting go “hand in hand with sport”, which meant “the physical condition of the boys was decidedly on the improve”, SSI p.3 but the discipline and attitudes encouraged in the boys also meant that “the Midsummer Examination percentage of passes caused the Rev Septimus (the headmaster) to beam with satisfaction and the governors to bestow lavish praise on the headmaster and his staff of assistants.” SSI p. 3 The part played by external, challenging, natural environments in this improvement and in the principles of the Scout Movement is emphasised by Westerman.

In *Missing Believed Lost*, the story which involves Cornwall the least out of these titles in that although the voyage should have taken the boys to Cornwall they ended up in the West Indies due to the delusional master ostensibly in charge of the expedition. Their resourcefulness is therefore severely tested as they not only negotiate the elements but also deal with an adult who is “going batty”⁵ as the leader amongst the boys puts it.

(Also it is worth mentioning that the crooks tend often to be “inclined to flabbiness”. (SH: chap 1).

So to Westerman, the natural world is an integral and necessary part of the training a boy receives, hence the description of his portrayal of the natural world as part of a consistent holistic world, or life- view. Westerman’s use of landscape in his writing views nature as more than a backdrop or setting to what one ecocritical writer has described as the, “really

⁴William Howarth – *Some Principles of Ecocriticism* p. 70 in Glotfelty

⁵ Westerman, *Missing Believed Lost* 1949. p. 64

important things, human matters”,⁶ and another, the part a harsh landscape plays in the development of spiritual awareness, the building of character and the initiative to survive.⁷

Slide 4

The Wider Picture

But why should Westerman choose Cornwall, other than as a place and a coast he was familiar with parts of? What did Cornwall have to offer that ‘Southend’⁸ as the Scouts of Seal Island believed, did not?

If we think back a moment to the nineteenth century writers for young people, and boys in particular, although of course their sisters read the same material, adventure is found in the exotic and far flung places of empire. Much has been written about the influence of place on the imagination⁹. In the nineteenth century stories, the Foreign-ness/strangeness/mystery/unknown were found in the faraway lands of the empire. The hero was frequently, although not exclusively, the English boy surviving or taming the landscape in the sense of negotiating his way by initiative and resourcefulness through it, and thereby overcoming the threat concealed within it, in whatever form that threat appeared.

By the early twentieth century the threat is drawn closer to England as the possibility of invasion drew closer and attitudes to foreignness harden and become more stereotypical¹⁰. The critic David Mazel uses the term “domestic orientalism,”¹¹ the idea of bringing the exotic closer to the western centre. As perceptions changed, even the edges of Britain were regarded as wild and unfamiliar, places where adventures might take place.

[Note that the empire mind set is still strong in PW – see p 61 SSI e.g]

⁶ Michael J. McDowell. *The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight* 371-391 in Glotfelty p. 379

⁷ Leslie Marmon Silko. *Landscape, History and the Pueblo Imagination* pgs 265-275 in Glotfelty p. 275.

⁸ Westerman, *Scouts of Seal Island* p. 1

⁹ E.g. Glotfelty p. xxiii in Glotfelty, Cheryll and Fromm, Harold eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996.

¹⁰ See invasion narratives, work on comics Agnew, Kate, and Geoff Fox. *Children at War: From the First World War to the Gulf*. Contemporary Classics of Children's Literature. London: Continuum, 2001 quoted in Johnson, Rachel, “Remember we're British”: Did Percy Westerman Change the Henty Hero? Paper, Approaching War Conference, March 2013.

¹¹ David Mazel – American Literary Environmentalism as Domestic Orientalism pgs 137-146 p. 137 in Glotfelty

Taking this concept into account, the choice of Cornwall fulfils the need for wild otherness, a sense of remoteness from the ‘civilized’ centre. All of these stories emphasise the dangerous wildness of the “iron-bound” (SSP: 106) Cornish coast, wild seas, wild rocks, rough coastline, complete with, in (SSI : 6, SH: Chap 1)a “romantic ruin.”

In order to create a perspective on the concept of wild remoteness and the unknown as closer to the centre, it is only fair to mention that other perceived edges of civilisation are equally suitable, note for example John Buchan’s Scotland as a location for adventure, Alan Garner’s story *The Owl Service*, (1967) full of threat and menace, is based on medieval Welsh literature and located in Wales and, returning to Cornwall, Anthony Horowitz’s *Stormbreaker* (2000) in which Alex Rider is sent to investigate Sayle Enterprises, – see p.94 which organisation, he discovers operates from an underground workshop (AR: 128-30) which is strikingly similar to that of Don Miguel O’Rourke in Westerman’s *The Flying Submarine* ps 64-75.

Importantly, the place of adventure has to be far away from parents and other significant adults, because as you will know from your own reading, it is necessary to get rid of parents in order to have an adventure. In these stories, the parents are dispensed with, often by being despatched “abroad.”

In the *Scouts of Seal Island* for example, Westerman even makes sure that the scout leader, who is the only one familiar with the landscape, is called away, leaving the scouts to fend for themselves, at least for a short time, but a time in which activities take place that are dangerous and crucial to the adventure, before another scout leader arrives.

Westerman goes to some lengths in *Missing Believed Lost* p. 17-18 to explain the non-existence or unreachableness of all the parents of the four boys involved in the sea voyage,

Of these four boys, interestingly and Englishman, (*nb Englishman is natural leader*)a Cornishman, a Scotsman and an Irishman, the first’s parents were “abroad”, the second had no mother and his father was “serving abroad”, the third was an orphan with an absentee Uncle for a guardian, and the parents of the fourth were “temporarily absent ...”(MCL: 17-18). It is not often we get quite such precise and pointed explanations for lack of adult oversight.

Elemental Threats

The idea of wildness is necessarily demonstrated by a variety of elemental threats. In the context of Cornwall as location, these threats are fairly obvious and consistent, namely, the sea, hidden rocks, storms, high cliffs, caverns and remoteness, all of which provide potential for the development of mystery, and provide genuine danger and challenge for the hero. Sailing in rough seas is perhaps one of the most challenging examples of survival in extreme conditions and Westerman explains how the protagonists work with the conditions in situations that demand “negotiation between human and non-human”¹² so that survival and a way of coping with the ‘non-human’ are successfully devised.

Examples of such ‘negotiation’ range from rowing in thick fog (SSI), hearing the “groundswell upon the wild rugged coast”, relying solely on a compass, and with the awareness that even on the short journey from the mainland to Seal Island, it would be easy to hit jagged rocks (SSI p. 100) to hanging on in “mountainous waves” in a “cauldron of seething water,” “at the mercy of the elements”. (FS: 95) Holmsby and Tresillian, on board the *Amphibian*, state quite clearly “We are ready, sir, to brave the elements” when they are faced with the possibility of such danger.(FS: 96)The dangers potentially facing *The Sea Scouts of the Petrel* are graphically demonstrated during the storm when two boats are wrecked, “The schooner’s ground tackle had failed to hold her, and at the mercy of the wind and sea she was being borne rapidly towards a particularly dangerous part of that iron-bound coast” (SSP: p. 106). The Sea Scouts are under no illusions as to the dangers of the Cornish coast and how different it was to “the Kentish and Essex coast”. (SSI: 43)

Slide 5

It is this negotiation between ‘the human and the non-human’ that brings together once again the internal and external landscapes, since it “only by testing the boundaries of self against an outside medium” that a person can “realize who they are.”¹³ Not only is skill tested and developed, but also character.

Cornwall Real and Imagined

¹² Glotfelty, Cheryll, Introduction p xix, xx. *in* Glotfelty, Cheryll and Fromm, Harold eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996.

¹³ Scott Slovic. *Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology: the Interiority of Outdoor Experience* 351-369. p. 353 *in* Glotfelty, Cheryll and Fromm, Harold eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens and Lonon: The University of Georgia Press, 1996.

For the last brief section I would like to mention the interface between place as real and place as imagined in these stories.

Geographically, it is possible for a reader to place the location of the action quite precisely, for example, Sir Silas Gwinnear's estate is placed "near Padstow," in SSIp. 5, and Mevagissey features as a key location for action in SSP p. 104, amongst others, whilst Sampson Cove, Haslar Cove and Penkerris are fictional.

[Incidentally, both Haslar (FS and SSP) and Sampson (SSI and FS) reappear but as, one as person, Haslar, and one as place.]

Just as the real and the imagined Cornwall as location interchanges, so the real and the imagined can blur in the action of the stories, the imagined threats can emerge as real threats which in turn may become the subject of fiction.

Let me explain:

In PW the imminence (RS) or immediacy (SH) of WW1 (e.g. Rival Submarines, 1913, Submarine Hunters, 1918) feature as a significant real threat from outside which threatens to engulf the internal, domestic situation.

Imagined or fictional threats, such as occur in the more recent work of, for example, Anthony Horowitz's Stormbreaker, the threat is discovered on the edge (in Cornwall) but is taken into the centre, that is, London, where the hero, Alex Rider spectacularly prevents disaster.

In between Westerman and Horowitz chronologically in children's literature, there are examples of real threats which become the basis for fiction. One example, still based in Cornwall, on the edge of civilisation and therefore not part of the major internal domestic scene, is John Branfield's novel *Nancekuke*, written in 1971 and published in America as *The Poison Factory*. The story is based around the effects of the secret activities of the plant at Nancekuke, which produced nerve gas, although this production was not acknowledged by any authorities until 1997. (*Nearly thirty years later, fiction and history intersect in the acknowledgement by the MOD that nerve gas research took place at Nancekuke and of the continuing danger of the waste material in the locality. Newspaper reports in 1997 and 2000*¹⁴.)

¹⁴ "Britain Comes Clean on Nerve Gas.," Independent 28 May. 1997, Robert Mendick, "Revealed: 41 Deaths at Nerve Gas Plant.," Independent on Sunday 16 Jan. 2000. Robert Mendick, "Nerve Gas Dump Cover-up

The similarity of the image of the 'girt iron fence' around Sampson Cove, from *The Flying Submarine* p. 29 and that around the real Nancekuke plant, is notable.

Slide 6

When real threats are the basis of the story, then the real and the imagined become barely distinguishable and blur into one another.

Conclusion

In this brief investigation of Percy Westerman's writing, with Cornwall as a location, I have noted that the elements represented in the wild and exotic of the far away are all present in his representation of Cornwall as a setting for adventure. So the answers to the initial questions: Is it necessary for the location to be Cornwall and if so why?

And,

What does Cornwall represent in these stories?

have been answered like this:

No it is not necessary for the location to be Cornwall but the key point is that Cornwall is representative of one of Britain's wild places on the edge, and therefore the need for remote wildness and unfamiliarity is brought a lot closer than it was in the nineteenth century. It resonates with Westerman's love of, and knowledge of the sea and seamanship, and is a place with which he has some personal familiarity. The major question is the second one:

What does Cornwall represent?

Slide 7

So to finish with a resumé of the key points:

The unknown

The remote

Danger brought closer to the centre (home)

Fear of invasion of the domestic space (The exotic in domestic space)

Exposed: The Ministry of Defence Threw Away Equipment Used to Make Deadly Gb Sarin Down Old Cornish Mineshafts - Then Misled the Public.," [Independent on Sunday 6 Feb. 2000](#). Robert Mendick, "Ministry Admits Chemical War Dump.," [Independent on Sunday 21 May. 2000](#). "Today in Parliament.," [Times 18 Jan. 2000](#).

The unfamiliar and threatening aspects of the internal landscape

Westerman is once again, writing out of his immediate historical context and representing immediate societal anxieties and threats to internal peace in his stories.

But – the perception of Cornwall as a wild place persists and is now encouraged in order to attract people to visit and explore.

This slide shows how Cornwall Wildlife Trust have tapped into the psychological attraction of the wild by planting the idea of wildness at the same time as communicating their aim of conserving wildlife in, and I quote from the Rival Submarines “the foremost county in England”. RS Chap. XI.

Slide 8.