

**W**INCHELSEA

First published in Great Britain, the USA and Canada in 2022  
by Canongate Books Ltd, 14 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1TE

Distributed in the USA by Publishers Group West  
and in Canada by Publishers Group Canada

canongate.co.uk

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available on  
request from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 83885 484 3

Typeset in Bembo MT Pro by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,  
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



‘There is only one Winchelsea, and there is no place like it, no place that so effectually and so pleasantly teaches us the lesson that we most need in these days of hurry and forgetfulness. Where else can one so well realise that there were strong men before Agamemnon; so well learn that the Agamemnons of to-day are but the strong men that will fall and be forgotten at the rise of the Agamemnons of to-morrow?’

Ford Madox Ford, *The Cinque Ports*

## *A Letter from Goody Brown*

Dear Reader,

Let us make one thing clear: lives do not take the shapes of stories. Any author who tries to tuck his subject between the covers of a book is forced to exchange reality for artifice. Certainly, I believed that what you are about to read was my story as I dictated it, told with as much truth as I was able. But writing a novel – which it appears that this tale now has become – is an act of settlement, banishing the native and replacing her with another that may seem to be her, yet is not.

The friend to whom I recounted this tale generously permitted me to edit or redact any passages I felt misprized or mangled my experiences, or whose relation caused me embarrassment. I took advantage of this license. The truth, though, was not to be found within the text, for all that I changed, for the sentences crossed through or added. In the end, I felt something like despair as I read, and wondered whether the fault lay with consigning my tale to a man, who could of necessity scarce comprehend what it is to be a woman. I discovered much greater truth in the author's prefatory

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sketch, which viewed me from without, than I did in that portion purportedly narrated in my own voice.

I should like also to make mention of my brother Francis, whose tale this is as much as my own. The reader will no doubt wish to know more of Francis's childhood, his life in the Americas and cruel mistreatment at the hands of the slavers. This, I recognise, is how novels comprehend the character of those who move within them: they know the man by the child. But Francis's tale is not mine to tell, and while I mention elements of his escape from the slaver-ship in passing, I do not wish to visit the same violence upon the life of my beloved Francis that my late friend, albeit with no malicious intent, visited upon my own.

I ask you, then, to read this book as you would any by a man about a woman, reckoning for it to tell you more about the mind of the man himself than about the woman who is his subject.

Signed,

Goody Brown, Winchelsea, June 1779

## *Preface: The Death of Jim Lawrence*

THERE IS A certain device forged in the East that, when held to the eye, permits the operator to perceive time at speeds faster than the normal beat, and, conversely, to slow its march down until the world appears vitrified. I wish you to imagine viewing the Sussex town of Winchelsea through this sorcerous glass, so that the centuries might be condensed into a few short pages.

First, a thousand years back, the land is covered over by a blanket of water – the Camber, a vast inland sea. On a precarious spit interjoining the Camber and the roaring ocean, you will find Old Wynchelsea, a town known for the piratical ferocity of its sailors and the cunning of its shipwrights. Watch as the town grows and prospers, becoming the principal port of the realm, receiving wine from Bordeaux and Bayonne, Jerez and Lisbon. Cheer as French raiding parties are repelled. At its pomp there live ten thousand souls in Old Wynchelsea, with the town supporting fifty inns and two great churches. The sea is always there, though, waiting.

It is February 1287. The sea has already claimed one of the churches and a good many taverns. The town has a foot in the ocean. Now a great storm sweeps up the

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Channel and Old Wynchelsea is whelmed completely, the spit upon which it sits being sucked into the sea and all who live there drowned. The morning after, watery sun on flotsam: timbers that were once houses, beds, pews; bodies that were once stubborn, buccaneering folk.

Longshanks is on the throne at this point, and orders a new town to be built upon the Hill of Iham. Iham looks over the Camber towards Rye. Over two years the new town of Winchelsea is constructed, with each house perched atop a large cellar, and these cellars inter-linked by a network of tunnels, so that wine might be stored and moved without revealing it to the concupiscent eyes of French raiders or English smugglers. These tunnels, which are named the Under-Reach, sit themselves atop the ancient mines of Iham, dug by those who lived here before the Romans came, and which are said to penetrate down to the very heart of the earth.

Now Winchelsea thrives again, sitting fast within her walls, with three turreted gates safeguarding her seaward and landward entrances. As the years pass there commences an enterprise known as the Innings, whereby ingenious landowners claim first a field, then ten fields, back from the Camber. What was once the sea becomes farmland, and the Isle of Oxney is un-islanded. By the shore, though, things are less certain, and Winchelsea and Rye are moored above a shifting, transitory prospect of pools, marshes and sulphurous bogs, all transversed by three swift-flowing rivers: the Rother, the Tillingham and the Brede.

Winchelsea grows rich as England prospers. The church of her main square might be mistaken for a cathedral. Her houses become more splendid, their

doorways spout porticoes, their gardens grow orangeries; many of the original dwellings are levelled and replaced by elegant, square-fronted townhouses. Her sailors remain belligerent, fellish folk, but are now named lords and admirals by grateful kings. It is the golden age of the Cinque Ports, when Rye and Winchelsea oversee the administration of Hythe, Sandwich, New Romney, Dover and Hastings, near-independent from the rest of the country. Winchelsea's population is as rich just now as that of any town in Europe, with the wealthiest calling themselves Jurats, administering the thriving ports by means of an organisation named the Brotherhood and Guestling.

Then, and there's always a then, comes the long decline: the French invasions, the plagues, the reversals in warfare and diplomacy. The church is sacked and burnt, its vaulted narthex collapsing into rubble; rubble too are the town walls, swarmed over once too often by French soldiers and privateers. The great hospitals in the south of the town are destroyed, the largest houses ruined. Winchelsea's townsfolk die or flee, and a place that once held many thousand is scarcely eight hundred souls by the time of the Civil War. Grass grows between the cobbles of her streets; pigs graze on her thoroughfares; life becomes sleepy, back-countryish. Just the sort of place a smuggler, wishing to remain unobserved, might make his headquarters.

Now the picturing-device slows. It is the eighteenth century, a time of getting and spending, of great wealth built on the backs of bloody empires. We see Goody



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Brown, just a babe, plucked from the waters of the Brede by the man she will come to call Father: Ezekiel. We see her adoptive mother, Alma, and her brother, Francis, another orphan. Goody grows as a tree might grow: in short, surprising bursts, followed by years in which she hardly seems to change at all. By ten she is already larger than many of the good women of Winchelsea, who watch condescendingly as she goes by on her father's horse, her white-blond hair a plume behind her, her clothing that of a stable lad or smith's boy, her pale eyes set on the sea, or the high ridges of the Weald. Her father still dreams of making a lady of her, forces her into damask gowns, corsets and canes. She is happiest like this, though, out in the elements, or deep in the winding dark of the tunnels.

Now let us slow that time-machine down further still until we find Goody on a September evening, just shy of her eleventh birthday. She is standing where King's Cliffs meet the marshes, below the ruined walls of Winchelsea. Goody's father, the Cellarman Ezekiel, has tasked her with checking the fastness of the gates to the Under-Reach, to keep safe those goods stored within the tunnels from thieves or excisemen. She performs this duty, rattling the gate, peering in at the murk of the caverns beyond, which she knows intimately, having played in their close darkness since a small girl. She then turns to look out to Rye. There, over the marsh, coming towards her in the long late rays of the sun, she sees her friend Jim.

Jim Lawrence is his name. Fifteen, pimply and mopish, with a voice that creaks like a gate every third word. His father died three years hence in the workhouse and

he is the breadwinner now for his mother and three sisters. He has become a smuggler, as many do when there is little between them and starvation. Goody does not know him very well, but he always has a smile for her, even when he's been out in rough weather, or when there's been a close call with the Revenue.

Now, though, Jim is running pell-mell through the quaggy marsh, his arms and legs moving furiously. He skirts the ruins of King Henry's fort, turns and looks back, presses on. Goody climbs a little up the cliff to get a better view of him. She sees that three men are chasing Jim, men she recognises. Further back, she makes out another familiar shape: the squat, tub-like figure of her father, attempting to keep up.

Goody draws back against the cliff, into the cover of ferns, and watches. Nasty Face is the first of the men to catch Jim. He tackles him as if they were playing football, then takes him by his hair, pulls him to his feet and knocks him down again. Now Gabriel and Old Joll catch up with them. Her father is still some way back. They lead Jim to one of the ponds that pock the marsh. Jim tries to make a break for it, wading in, knee-deep, and Gabriel goes after him. They stand there facing one another for a few moments: the tall man with his sweep of black hair, the boy with his face a mess of tears and mud and blood. Finally Goody's father, winded, arrives at the pool and stands there, panting.

Words are spoken, mainly by Gabriel, and as he speaks, Goody sees him bind his fist in a piece of cloth. Old Joll and Nasty Face stand behind him as he hits the boy. After two punches Jim goes down in the water

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and comes up spluttering; but then the three men take turns to bring their heels, their fists, their elbows down on his head and his back until he doesn't come up any more. At the end, it is as if they are dancing a jig on his poor back, trampling him into the water. When they are done, they stand there for a moment, watching over the pool as it stills, breathing heavily. Ezekiel looks on, then reaches into his coat and draws out a notebook, scribbling something within. Goody feels a taint seep from that pool and drift over the marshland, over the river, towards her.

Now we rise out from Goody, a tall, square-shouldered child with great swags of hair the colour of sea spume. Her mouth is open, her pale eyes wide. She is fringed by fernbrake and hawthorn, deep in the greenery of the hillside. We rise up, over the town, its regimental streets and squares, its ruined church, its crumbling walls. We rise out until we see Winchelsea like a dim jewel set at the throat of the sea. Then all is ocean, and the wind is high about us, and we take the device from our eye, and permit Goody, at last, to begin her story.

# BOOK ONE

*The Life and Recollections of Goody Brown, of  
Winchelsea, as Told to One Who Knew Her*



# PART ONE

*Winchelsea, November 1742*



# I

I'D LEFT THE curtains open that night, the drapes of my bed too, so that the fire in the Hundred Place painted the walls of my chamber with fading reds. I lay with my feet arched around the bed-warmer, knees up, blankets to my chin. When I closed my eyes, I could still see fragments of light from the rockets, squibs and crackers fizzing off to explode over the marshes, lighting for an instant all the dark reaches of damp land.

That day the wind had swept in from the sea, tearing copper leaves from the trees. As dusk fell, Father and I had stood looking over the marshes to cold violet light edging down the sky, fires alight in Rye and Udimore, the first rockets whose colours reached us long before their sound.

We'd stayed out until the wind dropped, just past eleven, marching with the townsfolk because that was what my father's father and grandfathers had done before him. Father said some part of him felt those earlier Rejoicings in his bones, when they'd celebrated not the failure of a Catholic plot, but something more ancient: a last gesture of light and life before the coming of darkness. We were all brave on Bonfire Night.

Winchelsea sits moored most autumn nights in a lake



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of mist, and when there's a full moon the hilltop glows silver. In bed, hearing the watch pass below – 'Twelve o'clock and the mist is rising' – I fanned through memories: the ten or eleven Bonfire Rejoicings I could remember. For the last four – since I turned twelve and seemed to have grown a yard in a year – I'd been taller than my father, but I always perceived the younger impressions of myself there beside him, my small hand slowly growing to fill his as we marched through a decade of fire-breathers and masked dancers, the burning Popes and the boys rolling their flaming tubs. Francis had been with us in the early years, before he and my father fell out, and I'd strung myself between them, my almost-brother and nearly-father, and been swung into the air as we walked. Mother never came, at first because she'd felt it was not her celebration, this English riot, but then because she recognised it was something we did, Father and I, this tough little doctor and the awkward, lumbering girl who was both his daughter and was not.

Sometimes I know a thing moments before it happens, and so it was just then. I felt all at once a perturbation of the air outside, a sudden rising in my throat. I sat up with a gasp and shot my legs out straight, sending the bed-warmer to the floor. Then came the banging on the front door.

## II

IT WAS A heavy fist on the oak, pounding hard and without pause, and each new thud seemed to shake the house. I lit my candle and went out into the passage.