# Eric O'Gowan (Dorman-Smith)/Chink

## Literary Friendships: Ernest Hemingway and Daphne du Maurier

### Ernest Hemingway

Eric Dorman-Smith first met Ernest Hemingway in the Anglo-American Club in Milan on 3 November 1918. It was news coming through of the Armistice, signed that morning with Austria, which prompted their first conversation. Eric was twenty-three years old and had been appointed Commander of British Troops in Milan, and Hemingway, aged nineteen, was a hospital patient in Milan, having been injured in the course of his duty as a Red Cross ambulance driver. They quickly become close friends, sharing conversations, travels, and adventures. In Paris Eric met writer friends of Hemingway, including James Joyce and Gertrude Stein, and saw paintings by Picasso hanging in her apartment. As well as mountain-climbing and ski-ing in the Swiss Alps, and fishing, there was time for reading and more literary discussions, and Eric's support and selflessness in times of crisis there would never be forgotten. He was initially horrified at what he saw when he went with Hemingway to the bullfighting festival in Pamplona, but it seems he learned from Hemingway to appreciate its rituals and techniques, and was soon immersed in the spectacle.

In Paris on 10 March 1924 Eric became godfather to Hemingway's son, John Hadley Nicanor, with Gertrude Stein as godmother, and James Joyce's son, Giorgio, playing the organ at the ceremony. As well as being godfather to Hemingway's son, the christening might not have happened without Eric's suggestion and involvement: "*I think it's as well, though, to have him christened…Just as soon as you settle down in Paris again, Pop, I'll be with you*," he wrote to Hemingway in Canada. Six months later Hemingway and Hadley were still reluctant but, Eric writes: "…*as I was his godfather I stuck to my guns*," In St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Rue de la Grande Chaumière, Paris, it is Eric who makes arrangements as Hemingway, feeling unsuitably dressed for a meeting with the minister, hangs back: "So I sent in my visiting card…He was a little puzzled as to what Captain Dorman-Smith of Bellamont Forest, County Cavan could be doing in the Quarter, but he was delighted to arrange a baptism." (See Greacen, pp 70-71)

Hemingway's poem 'To Chink Whose Trade is Soldiering,' dated Paris 1924, alludes among other things to the times they had together, and the line 'Watched the sun rise' will be echoed in the title of Hemingway's first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*:

To Chink Whose Trade Is Soldiering

When you are picked up dead
Your face gone ugly tight
The situation clearly outlined
By the dead
We won't believe you're gone
Your boots have dropped too many times
We've drunk too much good beer
Watched the sun rise
And cursed the rain
That spoiled the piste
Or turned the river brown
So flies were useless

Ernest Hemingway, Paris 1924 *(*Greacen, Frontispiece)

Although their paths diverged, each followed the progress of the other. Eric collected all Hemingway's new books as they appeared, and Hemingway kept up with events in Eric's army career, for example through his reading of memoirs by senior army officers. They met again in New York in the spring of 1950, just as Hemingway's new novel, *Across the River and Into the Trees,* was being serialised in *Cosmopolitan*. Hemingway's greeting to Eric at the Sherry Netherland Hotel shows both affection and the respect he still has for his literary judgment: *"Come in Chink. I've some poetry to read to you. I think it's good. I can't talk poetry to anyone but you."* Late in life Eric regretted not staying in closer contact with Hemingway, and at Bellamont in July 1961 he wept openly when he heard the news of his tragic death. There is great affection and sadness in the letters between Eric and Hemingway's first wife Hadley, after his death, where they recall the early years of their friendship.

One of the first literary signs of Eric and Hemingway's friendship is seen in the dedication in Hemingway's first book*, In our Time*, published in 1924:

> *to robert mc almon and william bird publishers of the city of paris and to captain eric edward dorman-smith, m.c., of his majesty's fifth fusiliers this book is respectfully dedicated.*

There would be many reflections of Eric in Hemingway's work, usually expressing affection and gratitude. For example, the character of the Englishman, Harris, in Hemingway's first novel, *The Sun Also Rises/Fiesta*, published 1926, is based on Eric (whom Hemingway always called 'Chink'). Apart from recognisable features and traits, there is evidence from Hemingway's notebook to support the link (see Greacen, p. 79). Both versions of his name appear in Hemingway's book about his safari in East Africa, *The Green Hills of Africa*, published in 1935: *"I hung my booted legs over the side to let my feet cool and drank the beer and wished old Chink was along,"* Hemingway writes when describing a hunter character known as Pop. He continues: *"Captain Eric Edward Dorman-Smith MC of his Majesty's Fifth Fusiliers. Now if he were here we could discuss how to describe this deer-park country…Pop and Chink were very much alike. ..I was learning under Pop, while Chink and I had discovered a big part of the world together and then our ways had gone a long way apart."* (Greacen, p. 110)

In the Introduction to his anthology *Men at War,* published in 1942, Hemingway pays tribute to Eric for teaching him some lines from Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part 2, which had meant a great deal to him:

> And I remember the sudden happiness and the feeling of having a permanent protecting talisman when a young British officer I met in the hospital first wrote out for me, so that I could remember them, these lines: 'By my troth, I care not: a man can die but once; we owe God a death…and let it go which way it will, he that dies this year is quit for the next.'

Some critics have seen Eric's influence on the character of Colonel Cantwell in Hemingway's novel *Across the River and into the Trees*, published in 1950, with one arguing that the novel was Hemingway's way of showing anger and grief at his friend's treatment by the British military and political authorities. (See Greacen, 325-327)

One of Hemingway's most poignant tributes to Eric and to their friendship appears in the chapter entitled 'A False Spring' in *A Moveable Feast*. This is a memoir about his life in Paris in the 1920s which Hemingway had begun writing in 1957 and was published

posthumously in 1964. Walking by the Seine on their way home from the race track one evening, Hemingway and Hadley stop on a bridge, and looking down at the river, they remember the times the three of them had spent together. Hadley reminds Hemingway of the discussions they had about writing:

> '… and you and Chink always talking about how to make things true, writing them, and put them rightly and not describe. I remember everything. Sometimes he was right and sometimes you were right.' ....
>
> 'We always miss Chink in the winter and the spring.' ....
>
> Chink was a professional soldier and had gone to Mons from Sandhurst. I had met him first in Italy and he had been my best friend and then our best friend for a long time. He spent his leaves with us then.
>
> 'He's going to try to get leave this next spring.' ....
>
> 'We're too lucky,' she said. 'I hope Chink will come. He takes care of us.'
>
> (*A Moveable Feast*, pp 44-45)

## Daphne du Maurier

John Hadley Nicanor Hemingway's baptism might not have taken place without Eric's intervention, and the same might be said for the marriage of Daphne du Maurier and Frederick 'Boy' Browning.

Eric met Browning at Sandhurst where they became very good friends. Although very different in personality, they were both well read, enthusiastic about fitness and winter sports, and they shared "a great desire to lift the quality of the peacetime Army, Boy largely through the training and discipline which he had seen working well in action in the Great War, Chink through the application of military science." (Mead, 36) Browning had a celebrated army career. He served in both World Wars, was decorated for bravery, and he played a crucial role in the establishment and development of Britain's airborne forces in World War II. He was adviser to Eisenhower, and he was Mountbatten's Chief of Staff. (Mead, 173) Like Eric's, Browning's career was not without controversy, arising from his role as Commander of the 1st Airborne Corps in the Battle of Arnhem in 1944. However, unlike Eric's, Browning's army career recovered. After the war, Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Browning served as Comptroller and Treasurer in the Royal household, working closely with Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip for a number of years.

Throughout his career in the British Army Eric made important contributions to both organisation and training, and he is considered to have been a brilliant strategist. In the summer of 1942 he was Deputy Chief of Staff to Commander Claude Auchinleck, who had taken control of the Eighth Army. It is widely acknowledged that it was the strategy which Acting Major-General Eric Dorman-Smith conceived for the First Battle of El Alamein in July 1942 which stopped Rommel's advance into Egypt. It also paved the way for the subsequent defeat of Rommel in the Second Battle of El Alamein in August 1942. Due to political pressure and other factors, both Auchinleck and Dorman-Smith were removed from command after the First Battle of El Alamein. The command was given to General Bernard Montgomery. Eric was demoted and he subsequently retired.

In 1932 Browning told Eric that Daphne du Maurier was refusing to marry him on principle – she did not believe in the institution of marriage. Eric met with her and, stressing Browning's great love for her, he persuaded Daphne that his career would be ruined if they lived openly together as she had suggested. Some accounts say that there was a mutual attraction from this first meeting and it certainly appears that Eric was fascinated by Daphne. Browning asked him to be best man at their wedding, but he declined. Eric and Daphne kept in touch over the years. Eric's biographer says that a "confessional penfriendship" continued after his break with the army and that this was resented by his wife Eve. It is not clear when this began or how sustained the correspondence was. There were certainly significant gaps as Daphne appears not to have had his address after his return to Ireland. According to one biographer, she had tried and failed to find Eric during a visit to Ireland with her son and his wife, at some point not long after their marriage in Dublin in 1964. Then in 1968 she sent her newly published book *Vanishing Cornwall* to Eric. He wrote her an emotionally charged letter of thanks, and enclosed a poem entitled: 'For Daphne, In Gratitude: Beauty Remembered.' (Forster, 377) It has not been possible to find this poem which might be lost or perhaps held in a private family archive.

After Eric's death in 1969 Du Maurier wrote a story entitled 'A Border-Line Case.' A strong argument is made by a number of critics that the character Nick Barry, who is involved in guerrilla tactical training and in researching Irish history and archaeology on his isolated lake land estate, is based on Eric. It's a complex story which includes elements familiar from elsewhere in du Maurier's work such as identity and gender switching, and some of her other recurring themes which have no connection with Eric. However, there are many elements which suggest that Nick Barry, also referred to in the story as "Commander Barry," is based

on Eric who had returned to Ireland after his time in the British Army. He studied Irish history and archaeology, explored his Irish ancestry, and changed his name from Dorman-Smith to O'Gowan (whilst retaining Dorman). He gave his support to the Old IRA's border campaign in the 1950s.

The story 'A Border-Line Case' gives a distance of "70 odd miles" for the journey from Dublin Airport to Ballyfane, the fictional town close to Nick Barry's home. This is the actual distance from Dublin Airport to Cootehill, the town in County Cavan where Eric lived. The locations of the hotel and post office in Ballyfane also match with those of Cootehill. Nick Barry's house is on an island in a lake. While Eric's home, Bellamont House* in Cootehill, is not on an island, its lake land setting and private estate it analogous to the setting of Nick Barry's home. The scene where Nick is uncovering a megalithic tomb is another connection, reflecting both Eric's post army interest in Irish archaeology, and the presence of an important megalithic tomb near Cootehill. In Nick/Commander Barry's house on the island there are rooms and apparatus for military exercises, and there is a running plot about covert operations. At Bellamont in the 1950s, Eric had assisted IRA activities, providing a training location and setting up an operations room in a large cellar. According to Greacen, this was seldom used and he did not really fit in or have the involvement he wanted. (Greacen, 310-314). There is a specific reference in the story to Armagh where there had been significant IRA guerrilla activity in the 1950s: "It's Armagh burning, or the best part of it." ('A Border-Line Case', Du Maurier, p. 149)

Eric seems to have loved Bellamont as much as Daphne loved Menabilly, her home in Cornwall. It became his refuge and perhaps his world in the post army years. When Nick is described by the father of the narrator early in the story as "mad as a hatter", it's possible that this is a reflection of Browning's view of Eric. Nick is also described as a recluse, which is similar to the partially reclusive lifestyle Eric had adopted in Bellamont. The father character in the story served in the navy with Nick, Browning had served in the army with Eric.

It's hard to make sense of Eric's involvement with IRA training at Bellamont, except to see it as a rejection of the British establishment, an extension of his reclaimed Irish identity as seen in his studies of Irish history and archaeology, in the name change from English to Irish, and in a playing out of all this in a version of the military life he had known.

Nick's good looks, his charming manner and witty conversation can also be seen to be drawn from Eric. As noted above, Eric had declined to be best man at Daphne's wedding to

Browning. In the story, a photograph of Nick as best man at the narrator's parents' wedding is very important in the plot. Du Maurier manipulates elements of this to a shocking conclusion which is quite unconnected with Eric. However, it seems that Du Maurier is exploring in this story Eric's personality, his attractiveness, the distinctive and beautiful landscape in which he lives, and the extraordinary fact of this former British Army officer's involvement in covert operations against the state. Perhaps an aspect of her feelings for Eric at this time can be seen in the empathy she evokes when she has Nick describe the peripheral nature of his role: "Actually, I'm only a consultant these days. "Ask Commander Barry," somebody says, "he may have a suggestion or two to make", and I come in from clearing cairns or writing history, and get cracking on the short wave." In just two sentences Du Maurier acknowledges not only Nick's low status in the guerrilla military organisation, but also his commitment to Irish history and archaeology and, crucially, his self awareness. The effect is to create respect and to evoke empathy for Nick at this point in the story. In light of the resemblance between their situations, we can understand this also as an expression of respect and empathy for Eric.

*Bellamont House was known also as Bellamont Forest, the latter name perhaps preferred by Eric. He refers to 'Bellamont Forest' appearing on the card he sent in to the minister at St Luke's Episcopal Church in Paris.

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