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Editor John Evans

Book Review :: The Minack Chronicles

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A friend of mine — a book collector — has a complete set of first editions of the Minack Chronicles. The what, you say? They are twenty or so volumes of country autobiography, written by Derek Tangye.

You've never heard of them? Well, the myth of the Minack Chronicles has not affected everyone. After the deaths of the two protagonists, Derek and Jeannie Tangye, the books rarely figure in the new global literary imagination. Which is a shame, because they have much to tell us.

I have a slight connection with Minack because, back in 1997, I applied unsuccessfully to Lord Falmouth for the agricultural lease to the property. In the aftermath of Derek's death, the Falmouth Estate was looking for a new tenant, someone who would take care of the literary heritage of the place, and preserve it as a nature reserve.

So, what is the truth about Minack? Is it an English Shangri-la, or just another publishing opportunity?

The American dream is to join the high-rollers of a largely fluid society and take one's place at the top of the tree. The English version is naturally based on class and has undergone some changes in recent years. Of old, it was an aspiration to the Squirearchy. Nowadays, it's a rugged farmhouse in the country and a smallholding full of organic produce.

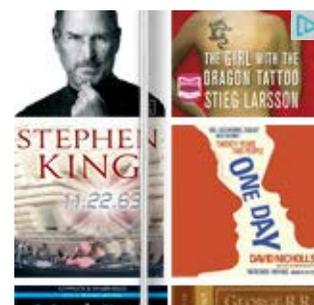
But Derek and Jeannie got there first. Way back in the austere 1950s they abandoned their London lives ~ she as a famed publicity queen with the Savoy Hotel, he as a social gadfly and sometime journalist ~ and moved to a minuscule cottage on the coast near Lamorna in West Cornwall. Through Derek's writings, Minack became a promised land to millions around the world.

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So was it quite as idyllic as the dream would have us believe? The answer is a complex one. The pair stuck it out until their deaths, Jeannie's in 1986 and Derek's in 1996, so we can assume that life was at least tolerable.

But their early years were undoubtedly harsh. Converting the cliffs into those peculiarly Cornish potato meadows, that have to be tilled by hand, was never going to be easy for urban people. Daffodils and other early-season flowers dominated the remainder of the rough landscape. Weather was fickle — as it always is. Prices fluctuated — as they always do. Both Derek and Jeannie turned to writing to make ends meet — as the middle classes usually do. Each was successful in their own way, and this helped.

But soon the dark clouds of change swept over their demi-paradise. New cultivation methods elsewhere devastated the daffodil and new-potato industries. Tourists started to flood in, responding to the Minack legend created by Derek in his books. Suburbia came to Minack and never after left them alone.

In a book written after Jeannie's death, Derek reminisced about their relationship which, he revealed, was an open one. Each could stray a bit, or have a change of bowling, as Jeannie put it. This was a different story to the one portrayed in the Minack Chronicles. Their lack of children must have taken its toll in later years.

I went to Minack just after Derek's death to investigate the agricultural lease to the main property. The house, and 21 acres, was available for the right applicant. The owner, is Viscount Falmouth, by all accounts an enlightened landlord who recognizes Minack's place in the literary firmament.

I took the scenic route along the cliffs from Lamorna — not as easy as it sounds in the Chronicles — and found myself walking besides a lengthy fence, which skirted the cliff path. Eventually, I took a gamble and climbed over an old gate into what seemed a disused farmyard. It was Minack.

There was the cottage — oh, so small. How could they have lived in it all those years? The famous “bridge” (a vantage point) was bijou in the extreme; and Monty's Leap, that giant's causeway of the imagination, was a little trickling stream across the lane.

From such small and simple features came a whole world that resonated in the minds of jaded urbanites in every corner of the planet.

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Gilbert White did it for Selborne, and Derek Tangye made a mighty mountain out of his beloved molehill at Minack.

The lease went to a Mr and Mrs Bird, who are mentioned quite a lot in the Chronicles. After seven years living in Spain I settled just up the coast at Dartmouth.

Viscount Falmouth and I never did get together for that drink.

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