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PRINCE JENKIN SADDLER, HECTOR BEBB, AND 'ANOTHER KIND OF LOVE' IN RON BERRY'S *SO LONG, HECTOR BEBB* (1970)[1]

John Perrott Jenkins

Abstract

In *So Long, Hector Bebb*, why does Prince Jenkin Saddler regard his war experience as 'bloody alright' although he suffered severe injuries? Why have the years since been 'dead' until he meets Hector Bebb? Why did he not keep his promise to marry Jane Evass during or immediately after the war? Why is he fascinated by Hector Bebb from the outset? Why does he risk incarceration to protect Hector Bebb even though he says he needs space and freedom? Why does he sideline Jane Evass and then agree later to marry her? Why is he utterly inconsolable when Hector Bebb dies? The novel's fragmented form and elusive discourse raise these questions and more concerning Prince's relationship with Hector Bebb. To what effect, though? This essay is an attempt to venture an answer.

Keywords: Ron Berry, Hector Bebb, warrior, gladiator, war wounds, Sedgwick, continuum, Spartan, homosocial, D. H. Lawrence, desire, loyalty, duty.

With one notable exception the relationships between male characters in Ron Berry's *So Long, Hector Bebb* may be readily comprehended. Grouped together in the world of professional boxing, they are nonetheless located within a variety of cultural contexts: proprietorial in the case of the manager and businessman Abe Pearson and his string of boxers; paternal in the case of Hector Bebb's trainer and father-figure Sammy John; competitive in the innumerable boxers Abe Pearson's team trains with and fights; and friendship through banter between Sammy John and Tommy Wills (pp. 208–13). The one exception is the friendship Prince Jenkin Saddler has with Hector Bebb, and the

nature of that friendship. What is going on there? In one respect it appears to be little other than a straightforward association conferring mutual benefit.[2] Hector Bebb is a boxer of rare accomplishment who unintentionally kills his wife's lover, flees and is given refuge from the law by Prince Saddler who admires him. Prince Saddler is a landowning war veteran for whom Hector Bebb provides a captive audience for stories of his life-defining experiences in the Second World War. In one crucial respect, however, there is little mutuality. Hector Bebb is deeply grateful for what Prince offers, but there is little suggestion of close emotional engagement with him. This is not the case with Prince. In this essay I examine the nature of Prince's developing and, for him, increasingly problematic emotional commitment to Hector Bebb. After this general introduction, the essay references the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on male sexuality and the cultural context that provides a frame for discussion of this relationship. It is a context that reaches back to warrior relationships in classical antiquity and forward to the twentieth century homophobia that was being challenged in the 1960s when Berry wrote his novel. Attention then turns to detailed examination of the specific means by which the possibly transgressive, suppressed nature of Prince's commitment to Hector is presented in the text.

In an article on *So Long, Hector Bebb*, Sarah Morse notes that '[i]t is through many of the female characters of the novel that Berry explores the sexual nature of bodies. Sue John, Jane Saddler, Bella Pearson, and Millie Bebb all reflect on the sexual aspects of their relationships'.[3] Each one of these female characters is reflecting frankly on heterosexual relationships whether extra-marital or not, but all situated within socially acknowledged norms of gender behaviour. Prince Saddler, however, is fascinated not by a woman's body, but by Hector Bebb's. And he is fascinated from the first time he sees it. It is not only the physique he is drawn to, but what the body of such a boxer represents for him: the physical manifestation of the male as 'warrior', with a body shaped for contest, for *agon*. Given Prince's reserved manner and gruff stoicism, there is little in what he says that suggests overt 'desire', and in a homophobic culture to whom would he say it anyway? And so Berry's technique in developing the thread of Prince's increasingly problematic devotion to Hector is necessarily oblique. It is a method that relies on context and tone to gather a weight of suggestion and significance where the innocuous term 'homosocial' will not quite do.

The novel's formal architecture facilitates Prince's representation as a figure with a repressed sexual subjectivity. The larger narrative is transmitted through the disembodied voices of fourteen characters, each of which is separated within his or her own 'capsule'. This is a master stroke by Berry for the very form of the novel replicates the personal isolation so many of the characters experience. It is especially true of Prince, damaged by his disfiguring war wound, damaged emotionally by his military code of honour, damaged by his hermit-like existence on the farm, and damaged by a puzzlingly tepid pre-war promise of marriage to Jane Evass that he was somehow reluctant to fulfil. By giving Prince his own voice, the narrative offers the prospect of an intimate relationship with him. But he remains an enigmatic figure, negotiating a problematised past with Jane Evass that he cannot accommodate still less clearly articulate, and cherished memories of life alongside his tank crew in the war. His preference for 'War talk' (p. 62) with Hector Bebb suggests that he regards Hector's presence as functional, though enjoyable, even as he becomes drawn, perhaps initially unconsciously, more dependent on him. Berry's indirect narrative method therefore invites the reader to enter an imaginative space with only a sketchy map as a guide. What follows in this essay is an attempt to navigate a route through it.

* * *

Berry began *So Long, Hector Bebb* in the early 1960s, a decade of dramatic challenges to existing orthodoxies, not least in its attitudes to gender epistemologies and sexual behaviour. It was also the decade, too, in which the cinema-going public was provided with a swathe of Hollywood epic films set in the ancient world.[4] 1960, for instance, saw the release of a Hollywood box office hit in which a gladiator called Spartacus leads a rebellion against his Roman masters.[5] Two years later came *The 300 Spartans*,[6] a film version of the Battle of Thermopylae (480BCE) in which 300 battle-hardened Spartan warriors heroically demonstrate their commitment to 'duty, discipline, the nobility of arms in a cause worth dying for […] and the triumph of will over seemingly insuperable odds.'[7] All are qualities of the warlike spirit endorsed by Prince Saddler who sees them reincarnated in his own 'gladiator' and 'warrior', Hector Bebb. Both films, and several others like them, celebrate male physicality, courage and endurance,

together with the implicit *donnée* that in the world of the warrior male 'friendship was more important than marital love'.[8] Events prove this to be the case with Prince Saddler also. It is the nature of the 'friendship' that is problematic.

Also in 1960, and farther along the cultural spectrum, a novel published initially in 1921 was issued in modestly priced paperback format that made this implicit filmic *donnée* rather more explicit. D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* has a chapter, significantly entitled 'Gladiatorial', in which two friends, the pit owner Gerald Crich and the school inspector Rupert Birkin, wrestle naked with each other in Crich's large library.[9] Lawrence's language throughout their engagement is unambiguously erotic.[10] Finally exhausted, they rest together and, unusually for men, talk intimately about love. Crich declares, 'I don't believe I've ever felt as much *love* for a woman as I have for you – not *love*'[11] (p. 310, original italics). Birkin understands that what Crich yearns for is to feel 'Fulfilled'. Berry acknowledged the great influence Lawrence had on him – he claimed to have 'read the whole of Lawrence, everything he ever wrote, I read'[12] – and Lawrence's chapter fuses two aspects of the male character that appear, I suggest, in a variant form in Berry's representation of Prince Saddler: enthusiasm for physical contest – *agon* – and an inclination toward (male) passion – *erôs*. The nakedness of Crich and Birkin, the scene's conflation of classical Greek desire and Roman gladiatorial practice find a ghostly presence in the overt 'warrior' spirit that Prince endorses, together with the suppressed desire for 'fulfilment' that, unlike Crich, he is unable even partially to address. As *Women in Love* draws to a close Birkin admits to his wife Ursula: 'Having you, I can live my life without anybody else, any other sheer intimacy. But to make it complete, really happy, I wanted eternal union with another man too: another kind of love.'[13] Quite what 'kind of love' Birkin imagines he would have shared with the now late Gerald Crich remains tantalisingly unspecified, though Birkin's sentiments are declaratively unambiguous alongside their more oblique presence in Berry's novel.

Male *erôs* had, in the 1960s, and still has to some extent, a strained relationship with the concept of 'warrior' manhood. For much of English imperial history the two phenomena were mutually exclusive, neatly covered by such uplifting terms as *esprit de corps* and *camaraderie*. Such a disconnection between love and valour has not always been the case of course. The gender theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

reminds us, for example, that '[t]he virility of the homosexual orientation of male desire seemed as self-evident to the ancient Spartans […] as its effeminacy seems in popular culture'.[14] Yet as a product of his homophobic time and culture, the 'warrior' in Prince is unable to confront or express the nature of his feelings for Hector. 'Male bonding', 'brotherly love' and 'homosociality' are generally considered more acceptable terms in describing male friendship because they connote 'strong' gender boundaries with no suggestion of *erôs*. These innocuous declarations of fraternal 'loyalty' indicate how a repressively homophobic ideology insists on the discursive means by which that loyalty may be expressed to render it 'safe' and 'manly'. 'Male bonding', Sedgwick writes, is usually used in the same sense as homosociality, to characterise 'intense homophobia'.[15] It is a noun identifying the confraternity of a group of heterosexual men engaged in commonly noted, unremarkable male activities like working down a pit, playing rugby or getting together in the pub. Challenging this reassuring differential, Sedgwick once again draws on the warrior society of ancient Greece where 'the continuum between "men loving men" and "men promoting the interests of men" appears to have been quite seamless'.[16] She proposes that:

> to draw the homosocial back into the orbit of desire, of the potentially erotic, is to hypothesise the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosociality and homosexuality – a continuum where visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted.[17]

Rather than being constrained by tight semantic boundaries, then, homosociality and homoeroticism move along a line where the distinction between them becomes fluid, so that homosocial desire is not precise and static but dependent on occasion and context. And so, in Sedgwick's continuum, homosocial 'desire' might not incline toward the erotic (although it might 'potentially'), but farther along the continuum it might incline distinctly toward homosexual desire. Prince Saddler offers manifold examples of a wish to 'promote the interests' of Hector Bebb. Lodged in a homophobic culture, what he finds problematic and is unable to admit is the nature of the friendship he feels for him. Sedgwick's continuum of homosocial desire offers the space to examine Berry's presentation of Prince Saddler as he moves along this line, and the presence of Jane Evass, his second cousin, is instrumental here.

In an early draft of the novel there was no Jane Evass. The Prince Saddler character was instead conducting an affair with Mrs Mainwaring, the wife of Major Mainwaring, his officer in the war. In this version, Prince appears contented enough for Hector Bebb to describe them together as 'a pair just like Sammy and Sue'.[18] Removing Mrs Mainwaring and replacing her with the astute, acerbic, resentful Jane Evass not only removed Prince from a sordid affair, but it also removed his uncomplicated heterosexuality. In her barbed responses to Prince regarding his bonding with Hector, Jane Evass presents an acutely observed interrogation of Prince's own problematic subjectivity, while also articulating her own fears of exclusion. And, unlike Lawrence's Birkin, Prince Saddler's character and circumstances proscribe any attempt to explain to the woman he eventually marries, years after first disappointing her, the complications of his feelings for another man.[19]

It is worth considering Prince's war wounds here for they place him in a literary tradition where such wounds have a psychic and symbolic as well as a visual function. The semiotics of his injuries are at once obvious – he has lost an arm and is facially disfigured – but they also prompt questions about his sexuality that circulate as an undercurrent through the narrative. As the gender theorist Todd W. Reeser comments, 'a missing arm or leg [can be] represented as a symbolic castration'.[20] In D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, two writers whom Berry had read, the war wound also has as a psycho-sexual dimension.[21] Writing on Hemingway's novel, Mark Spilka connects Jake Barnes's wound with Clifford Chatterley's in *Lady Chatterley's Lover.*[22] For Spilka, Barnes's wound 'can be read as an instance of the way in which war undermines the possibilities of "true love"', 'true love' here being heterosexual love, and Chatterley's 'is a good example of such projected impotence'.[23] In both texts, the injuries represent a physical inability to function sexually and also serve as an 'index of the post-war malaise, the barrenness of waste-land relations'.[24] Spilka's remarks on Barnes and Chatterley may also be applied to Prince. The most intensely satisfying relational experience that he has known until he meets Hector Bebb is with the men of his tank crew: 'They were my comrades. We lived side by side, we were like brothers' (p. 149). Living side by side with other men, whose death in war he still mourns, constituted an epiphany for him. His injuries beg the question: Was his disfigurement the reason he broke his engagement to Jane Evass, or the means by which he could avoid marrying a woman he realised he could

not love as he had loved his 'brothers' in the war? His language, as so often on these matters, is opaque. He considers himself 'guilty. Guilty. Damn-well broken' (p. 64). But guilty of what, broken by what, if not by a war experience he paradoxically found 'Bloody alright'? (p. 62)

* * *

Prince's physical wounds signify not only his emotional and relational isolation, but also explain his fascination with male definition through the body. As Anthony Easthope reminds us, 'the self finds its identity in a bodily image'.[25] In true stoic tradition, Prince is apparently antipathetic toward his own damaged body – he dismisses his artificial arm as a 'grappling gadget' (p. 59) – and so he shapes a vicarious self-definition through association with Hector Bebb. Hector's physique becomes the object of Prince's admiring gaze from the outset. His very entry into the novel coincides with his first sight of Hector on a training run, and the seemingly innocuous account rewards close examination for the scrutiny by Prince of the male body in action (pp. 58–9):

> His head swam above the hedge top. At the gate he jinked off like a surprised wolf, shoulders swaying, his feet pawing lightly, chin tucked low. He sucked breath, exhaled, whiffed as he spoke. 'Didn't expect to meet anybody up here.'
> I said, 'Neither did I.'
> He rotated his head, lackadaisical, coming forward, composed, lithe as a middle distance runner.

Prince sees a figure endowed with purposeful agency and offers not so much a description as a wholehearted appraisal of prime male physicality: its elemental nature, instinctive rhythms, unselfconscious composure; the effortless grace of its movement as Hector's feet 'paw' the ground like a panther; the lithe insouciance with which he then approaches this strange-looking, disfigured man. This is the first, but not the last time that Prince scrutinises Hector's body with palpable admiration. On the next occasion, when he and Hector are duck hunting, 'potentially erotic' inclinations implied here are suggested more strongly.

In the proxemics of this first meeting, Prince's resentment at Hector's trespassing – 'you're on my land' – conflicts with his admiration for

this solitary figure running alone on the Bryn mountain and disregarding two NO TRESPASSING notices. But his appreciation of Hector's kinetic grace at first competes with proprietorial hauteur: 'you'll have to stay off my land'. In their exchanges, Hector shows neither deference to a member of the landowning class, nor challenges Prince's proxemic dominance. Instead, he undermines it through his artless enquiry regarding how Prince came by his war wounds. Responding to such directness, Prince becomes disarmed metaphorically as well as literally, and experiences a need to impress this stranger. He regards his imperious reply 'Seventh Armoured Division, Alamein' as 'unwarrantably smug, ridiculously proud, behind the undead years'. And so for him the years since the war have been 'dead', devoid of purpose or animation until he sees this 'strange alien in his maroon track suit'. It is an extraordinarily galvanising experience for him: 'Bebb reminded me of comrades who relished war as the supreme existence. Sleepless, thirsty, hungry men, controlled by loyalty, by blind purpose, accepting fatigue, sand-sores, death, desolation' (p. 60). It is an image of warrior manhood that recurs through the ages. A Spartan hoplite would doubtless have agreed, as does a veteran of a more modern war.[26] For Prince, Hector Bebb, professional boxer, becomes Hector Bebb warrior, a man born for contest, for *agon*. Put another way, Prince's 'undead years' are rekindled by what Jonathan Rutherford describes as 'the autoerotic desire to spy on the bodies of others'.[27] And so Berry has his growing fascination with Hector's gestic embodiment progress rapidly through voyeurism, when 'Most mornings I watched him through binoculars, his stubbed brown head floating along the hedge-top.' Then comes the homosocial gesture: 'Join me, Hector […] I'm about to brew up' (pp. 60–1), followed by a perception that Hector Bebb is 'a natural warrior' who 'fits my time' (p. 64), as the homosocial is slowly drawn back into Sedgwick's 'orbit of desire'.[28]

Victor J. Seidler observes that male friendship is often conceived 'in terms of shared interests that seem to be objective',[29] and as Prince grows closer to Hector the discursive formulations with which he describes him appear to be recurring evaluations operating safely within impermeable boundaries of gender definition. Hector is, for example, a 'natural warrior' (p. 64); a 'gladiator' (p. 75); 'designed outside of rote' (p. 121); a 'warrior' (p. 150), 'the lost warrior' (p. 201). However, within the context of the entire narrative, they move along Sedgwick's continuum to suggest inclinations toward *erôs* (powerful though not exclusively

sexual love) masquerading as judicious appraisals. Hector claims to be 'immune to sentiment' (p. 151) but Prince, in this regard at least, is not. Anxious to re-live and communicate his own martial experiences, he sees in Hector a paradigm of manhood with whom he believes he can 'exchange modes of experience' (p. 120) acquired through contest and kinship. And one of those 'modes of experience' is a form of 'brotherly' love. Hector's presence allows Prince to live again, even if only through memories. Women and relationships with them are excluded from their discourse. Hector notes, for instance, that 'We don't discuss Millie (Hector's wife) at all' (p. 140). The 'exchange' is not equal, however, for Hector finds little satisfaction in performing as 'a record player' (p. 142) with repeated stories of his career in the ring. For Prince, by contrast, dwelling on such modes of experience substantiates his own conservative epistemology of gender roles, while satisfying his need for proximate, emotionally fulfilling male friendship.

Lacking any formal means of diegetic, authorial intervention or clarification, and given the acutely sensitive subject that concerns them, *So Long, Hector Bebb* requires these exchanges to suggest a surface ripple in Prince concealing a submerged current of feeling. Unlike Lawrence's Rupert Birkin, Prince's repressed sexuality prohibits any attempt to explain to Jane the nature of his feelings for another man. And so the novel's reliance on the cumulative effect of insinuation, indirection, defence and attack to convey its meaning in their exchanges rewards close examination. Their discourse, after all, challenges not only Prince's estimation of himself, but inscribes a woman's implied critique of his sexual identity and, after they eventually marry, of his very love of her. On the first occasion when the text is articulated through Jane Evass's voice (pp. 120–4), she and Prince are discussing his decision to shelter the fugitive, Hector. It begins reasonably, the emphasis being on the extent to which Hector Bebb's presence on the farm will disrupt Prince's life, and the ordered unhappiness and disappointments to which she and Prince have become accustomed over the years during their visits to each other.

Their tactic of objectifying their biases through a quasi-reasoning discussion is only partially successful. These exchanges reveal her fear of marginalisation, his reluctant progression toward half-acknowledging his emotional dependence on Hector, and the shifting power dynamics articulated through their particular discourses. In her forensic control of language, Jane exhibits characteristics coded as male and cerebral,

Prince in his justifications those coded as female and emotional. His caution in broaching a subject so close to him is evident in his evasive, periphrastic speech, with its contrived hesitancy near the end and its refusal to mention Hector by name: 'Interesting situation, Bryn farm sheltering a man who has committed manslaughter. The careless march along of history, Jane, bringing this ah'm, this antithesis of your ancestors' (p. 120). Jane's response, 'You seem to find a certain harmony with him' (p. 120), is a sarcastic reproof masquerading as a disinterested observation. When Prince attempts to justify himself, the imprecision of his rhetoric once more contrasts with the biting clarity of hers:

> The man is exceptional, Jane, he's designed outside of rote, that stale so-called chemistry, the jiggery-pokery of what it takes to be a man.' 'Hyperbole,' I said. 'You are trying to glorify mundane reality. (p. 121)

Having made no impression on Jane by these faux-dispassionate statements, Prince resorts to a pathetic personalising: 'He accepts me for what I am' before resorting to comforting cliché: 'we shall soldier on, two maimed individuals as it were, side by side'.

What follows is an extraordinary exchange, at once ambiguous and laden with unexplained significances. When Prince assures Jane that Hector Bebb will not intrude into their lives, she responds, 'Ultimately, he will break you down […] Having little or no conscience *he becomes yours*' (p. 122, my italics). The framing of the discourse here is, as ever, evasive. How will Hector Bebb 'break' Prince down? And in what way will he then, paradoxically, 'become' Prince's? What do Prince and Jane mutually understand that is denied to the reader? From what shared history does this emerge? Her words prompt this extraordinary response: 'Jane, you speak as though Hector and I …'. Why the aposiopesis? Does Prince read one meaning in what she says when Jane is implying another? Does he have a guilty conscience regarding his feelings Hector? Is that what he thinks she is referring to? Are they speaking at cross purposes? Does he not have the words to express what he means? Dare he not express it? Jane supplies a completion for him, 'Are mutually destructive', as though she is fearful of where his inchoate admonishment might lead. But what she means remains unstated. One thing is clear, however. She speaks out of a knowledge of Prince, and it is evident that she regards his close association with Hector Bebb as

destructive to both. When she finally asserts that Prince should 'Send him away from Bryn farm', he terminates the argument with a display of dominance not through verbal dexterity, which has failed him, but through brutal gender as a determinant of authority: 'He turned full face, his mouth squared ugly off his teeth. "No, Jane, no!" and all conflict ceased' (p. 122). It ceases for the moment, but the incident witnesses the marginalising of Jane Evass. The text underpins Jane's dislodging through an objective correlative in the 'sered dockweeds', the 'pom-pom dahlias […] shivering', and a flock of jackdaws 'fragmenting like blown rags' (p. 122) that she sees outside the room. Within a landscape of fruitfulness past its season, Jane reflects: 'My own love, the life of a lost ache, loss, loss, loss filling my belly' (p. 122).

The details of their personal histories prompting such exchanges rest beneath the surface and largely remain there, though Prince tersely outlines the disillusioning progression of their relationship: 'Private rapture, dreams ruptured, tangibly fading' (p. 64). But Prince's loyalty to Hector overrides anything he feels for Jane, to the extent that he is willing to risk incarceration himself in harbouring a fugitive from the law, no small sacrifice when he has announced earlier '*I must have space*' (p. 61, original italics). It aligns him with his tank crew, willing to risk their own safety for their friends, willing to submit themselves to confinement in a tank for a noble cause. As mentioned previously, the sentiment runs through history from antiquity, when 'male friendships were celebrated as the highest expression of the noblest virtues – bravery, loyalty, heroism, duty.'[30] To become so personally involved, to take such risk, prompts the question, Where on Sedgwick's continuum does Prince's 'friendship' lie at this stage? What is it, if not a committed form of love?

As the narrative moves along the five and half years that Hector Bebb lives on Bryn Farm, Jane Evass's anger, frustration and impotence at Hector's presence manifest themselves in her sarcasm. Even Hector notices that she mocks Prince's approvingly martial terms for him, that she 'mentions *gladiator* in that dry way they speak instead of quarrelling outright' (p. 138, original italics), but so much of the textual dynamic remains unstated. It becomes more explicit, or at least more suggestive, in a crucial section voiced by Prince (pp. 148–55). The temporal line of his account is sometimes unclear, seemingly switching back and forth between his pre-marital and post-marital condition, but the effect is to construct a series of suggestive situations where

context endows language with a suggestive sexual energy. It begins with Prince reminiscing again to Hector about the Desert War, and how the enemy was given a 'left hook at Alam Halfa and we knocked them for six at Alamein' (p. 148). This is Prince the warrior in typical form, proud enough to use an inclusive pronoun, wounded physically and grieving still the loss of his entire tank crew, but contextualising battle within the discourse of sport. Shortly after this, however, he requests that Hector leave Bryn Farm, as 'Jane Evass and I are planning to get married' (p. 150). The reader has been offered scant preparation for this announcement as, it seems, has Hector Bebb. In responding, Hector blurts out that it is 'about time an' all' (p. 150). Why, then, has it not happened before? Why has Prince decided to marry Jane Evass now? Is he assuaging a guilt at not marrying her after the war as he had promised? Or is marriage a means of dispelling or marginalising his uneasy feelings of a love of Hector Bebb? As elsewhere in the text, there is no clarification. Instead, Prince abruptly changes the subject. He invites his 'old warrior' to go duck shooting with him, and the scene ends on a note of apparent bathos.

The duck shooting episode that follows immediately is hardly bathetic however (pp. 150–1). The juxtaposing of the two episodes invites further questions and suggests possible answers regarding Prince's decision to marry, and his attitude to Hector. A duck Prince has shot falls into the waters of Pont Fawr reservoir that are too cold for the retriever but not too cold for Hector Bebb. Berry then creates a *mise-en-scène* unlike any other in the novel. As a naked Hector prepares to enter the water, Prince, who is not given to flights of lyricism, recalls how:

> Venus sparked in the November dusk above the mountains, hoar frost faintly crepitant all over the near hillside, the air windless, chilled.
> I said, 'Leave it, you'll freeze.'
> He waded in, elbows splayed, dove into slow breast stroke, dignified, the mallard still toppled motionless, blurred, ripples circling far out on the flat water. The bitch thrust her flanks along the turf, scurried, panted frantic spurts, warming herself. It was dark when he returned to the bank, the mallard hanging from his mouth. He swung his arms, jumped, rubbed himself, violently grunting, a naked dervish under the stars. Before dressing he towelled himself with his cardigan. (p. 151)

From his evocative description of the setting to his observations of Hector's actions, Prince's account verges on the entranced as he inscribes a celebration of physicality bordering on the erotic.[31] There is no framing Hector Bebb here in the safe categories of 'warrior' or 'gladiator', or even referring to Hector by name. He is simply an essentialised 'he', an embodiment of natural male agency. Prince experiences what Jonathan Rutherford calls 'the repressed homoerotic desire' of imperial masculinity for the 'primitive'.[32] Coming so close to Prince's announcing his coming marriage to Jane Evass, this episode leaves little doubt of his move along the continuum on this occasion toward 'erotic desire'. It goes beyond the safe catch-all of 'brotherly love' or any of the innocuous terms available to ensure the maintenance of 'safe' gender boundaries. It is beyond anything Prince could know or achieve but it is something he craves. It is a homoerotic desire to *be* with that figure, to identify himself wholly with and through that figure. He exhibits no such engagement with Jane. And here we are reminded once more of Gerald Crich's words to Birkin in *Women in Love*: 'I don't believe I've ever felt as much *love* for a woman as I have for you – not *love*'[33] (text's italics). And how, by contrast with Birkin, Prince, with his repressed background of what Rutherford calls an 'imperial masculinity', could never recognise still less negotiate that massive cultural shift.

Later, as Jane prepares the duck for dinner, the text constructs a ritualised paradigm of Prince's inability to keep his marital promise regarding Hector, who is not present. Significantly, it is presented through Prince's voice. Christopher Forth writes that 'the experience of being "civilised" is a peculiarly bodily, and often gendered fact',[34] and when Prince recounts to her Hector's remarkable bodily performance in retrieving the duck 'response blanked from her face' (p. 153). What for him evokes devotion, for her evokes civilised contempt for a lesser being: 'Primitives are geared to survival' (p. 153). She 'quit the meal', as if to eat of the meat that Hector retrieved would acknowledge his vicarious influence over her, and pointedly sits 'with her back to the winter-bleached garden' (p. 153), as devoid of life and colour as she herself feels. When she finally does eat her meal, Prince observes that she does so 'fastidiously', as though to distance herself from Prince's admiration of Hector's 'aboriginal certitude' (p. 153). For Prince, it is a telling instance of 'all our spoiled years closing in upon us' (p. 153). This unsatisfactory communion, where the text constructs Hector as

occupying a liminal space between physical absence and incorporeal presence, becomes a marker defining their marriage.

The prospects for a happy marriage are even less auspicious than when she laid down the condition that Prince 'choose between me and your exiled gladiator' (p. 152). It is the kind of ultimatum a husband might give a wayward wife. Prince's bland reassurances bring only gnomic responses from her, where innocent terms carry for them an unstated but mutually understood alternative level of signification.

> 'You were wrong five and half years ago,' I said. 'Joe [Hector Bebb's assumed name] hasn't attempted to molest or domineer me in any way.'
> 'Why feel afraid for him?'
> 'We have lived together as comrades.'
> 'In arms,' she rebuked quietly. 'but deprived of war.' (p 153)

These episodes, narrated by Prince, insinuate a greater and arguably more evidently erotic charge into his feelings for Hector Bebb. The text becomes yet more suggestive in inscribing Prince's desolation and consequent emotional disloyalty to Jane after they marry, and Hector is presumed drowned in Pont Fawr reservoir. Prince's behaviour and the source of that behaviour become an index of his loss of normatively perceived stabilised identity. As so often elsewhere in *So Long, Hector Bebb*, it is the echo of a parallel from the world of the warrior of old that enriches the texture of the narrative and contextualises Prince's behaviour. In *The Iliad*, when Achilles learns of the death of his devoted friend Patroklus, killed in battle by Hector, he is demonstrably inconsolable: 'He took up the sooty dust in both hands and poured it down over his head […] And he lay there with his whole body sprawling in the dust, huge and hugely fallen, tearing at his hair, and defiling it with his own hands.' Desperate to offer solace to this pre-eminent warrior, his mother, Thetis, 'took her son's head in her arms'.[35] Prince's behaviour does not aspire to this heroic model, though it is just as undignified. He is 'morosely ill' for four days (p. 187), drinks himself into oblivion 'sinking double whiskies, all on his own there in the lounge' of The Lion (p. 180). After being driven home drunk by Tommy Wills, the name he 'grunts […] over and over' as he falls from the couch in a stupor is not his wife's but the talismanic 'Hector'. A modern-day Thetis, Jane sits 'nursing him on the floor, her two hands hiding the hole in his face' (p.

182). It is the pleading monosyllabic brevity of his confession later, 'I still miss him, Jane' (p. 201), that conveys the depth of his loss.

Thereafter, the novel dramatises Jane's increasingly liminal role in their relationship. When news arrives that Hector is alive, has been identified by a Tosteg newsagent and is again on the run, it is through Jane as observer that the narrative constructs Prince's rejuvenation. Recuperating all the agency of the dominant, militaristic male he is energetic and decisive, intent on visiting Tosteg to learn more, and dismissive of her reasonable reminder that there is urgent farming business to be done by the morning. Instead, she finds him 'reminiscently arrogant' (p. 236), stamping his feet and commanding her to 'Cancel everything until Monday' (p. 236). That evening, after labouring at the work Prince has neglected, and chilled from the rain, she performs a ritual which finally severs her past with him:

> I relit the fire with his love letters. Two layers, two distinct phases of amour: Jenkin's thrice-weekly cold war letters from Salisbury Plain, wadded supplements of wit, euphoria, almost pre-Raphaelite, luminous – these spread beneath his laconically once-monthly vows from the desert. While the kitchen warmed I locked the fowl sheds, fed the ponies, the dogs, the barn cats. The yearlings were splodged tight-massed, only half-filling the pen, sturdy descendants of my great-grandfather's stock all subdued under the persistent rain (p. 237).

Yet what she signifies as 'his love letters' and his 'amour' carry no suggestion of love: 'pre-Raphaelite' luminosity rather than passion, 'euphoria' rather than dejection; 'wit' rather than intimacy, 'vows' rather than love. He is honourable and dutiful, yet implicit in the text is the fact that the male company provoking such wit, and later the bonds with fellow men formed in the desert, penetrate more deeply into Prince's psyche than anything he feels for her. Or, importantly, felt even before he was wounded when he was a 'whole' man. Once more they raise the question of whether his war wounds released him from an unwanted obligation when they 'unplanned [their] obsolescent romance in the Roehampton Hospital garden, sitting there face to bandaged face' (p. 64). Recognising finally that Prince's 'blind devotion to his stoic gladiator' (p 239) is more deeply felt than anything he feels for her, she destroys the tangible evidence of the desire she has long suspected is

hopeless. The progression of the paragraph is illuminating, for it moves from the valences of her admiration and affection, to the quotidian duties of the farmer and then, through another objective correlative, to the implication that like her yearling lambs subdued by the rain, she, too is subordinate to the will of another.

When Prince returns to Bryn Farm with Sammy John, he re-emerges as a version of purposeful manhood through the time-honoured guise of the brotherly love one warrior feels for another. Jane's role in the enterprise is outlined for her in a litany of precise demands:

> Jane, we shall want flasks of soup, coffee, sandwiches wrapped in plastic bags. Two torches, Towel. Pack them in the haversack. Change of clothes. My corduroy jacket, trousers, green shirt, orange tie, raincoat, hat. Pack them in my service kitbag. (pp. 238–239)

The authority of Prince's discourse indicates the degree to which he is both living in the moment and re-creating his past. As he briskly outlines the strategy he and Sammy John will adopt, his exhilaration at facing the challenge of rescue and of being reunited with Hector becomes increasingly apparent. Like war it involves risk, and risk makes for the greatest game of all. Varda Burstyn writes that risk 'can provoke huge cascades of adrenal hormones and neurotransmitters and bring about an intensification of experience',[36] and to judge from Prince's discourse it is evident that the text is constructing such an experience for him. Suffused with excitement by the prospect of action to rescue a fellow 'warrior' from arrest and incarceration, Prince adopts a hierarchy operating not only within genders but between them. He will lead and direct Sammy who will accompany him. It is not quite war, but it is a contest with the future of a friend at stake. When Jane speaks of 'My ex-soldier husband' (p. 239), she sees the two terms as mutually exclusive, with Prince as a reincarnation of his former military self. Just as she had lost him to his tank crew, so she has lost him to Hector Bebb.

* * *

Berry's presentation of Prince's tormented feelings for Hector Bebb is necessarily oblique. One obvious reason is the narrative's entire transmission through the limited and limiting vision of the participants. Another is the nature of the participants themselves, enclosed

by background, temperament and a prevailing culture that discourages open debate on such matters. And so where he is positioned on Sedgwick's continuum can never be finally and unambiguously determined. But his interest in and fascination with Hector Bebb are sparked the first time sees him. To begin with, this interest signifies a certain homosocial desire. This deepens as the novel progresses until his commitment, his *erôs* – his devotion – to Hector Bebb supersedes all other relationships, even his relationship with his wife, as he is drawn into the 'orbit of desire, of the potentially erotic'.[37] R. W. Connell points out that the 'social patterning of desire is most obvious as a set of prohibitions'.[38] Such a prohibition may be seen in Prince's – and in Gerald Crich's – inability to articulate clearly their deeply personal cathexis. It is through Jane Evass's presence that *So Long, Hector Bebb* confirms how the discursive resources available to Prince are limited to innocuous 'brotherly love', so that any suggestion of improper feminisation is circumvented. In a prevailing homophobic culture, there is no continuum along which a figure like Prince Saddler feels he is able to articulate a serious emotional attachment to another man. In *Women in Love*, Gerald Crich attempts to explain his feelings for Rupert Birkin:

> [Crich] put his hand to his breast closing his fist there, as if he would draw something out. 'I mean that – that – I can't express what it is, but I know it […] You see, I can't put it into words. I mean, at any rate, something abiding, something that can change –'[39].

Crich feels 'something abiding' regarding his sexual identity, but he does not have the words to explain what that is. His hope is an unexplained 'something that can change –' which ends in a lame aposiopesis, just as Prince did not have the words when he had begun to respond with, 'Jane, you speak as though Hector and I …'.

At the close of *So Long, Hector Bebb*, Prince Saddler demands that Sammy John take him to the rock face over which Hector Bebb fell to his death. Presented from Sammy's perspective, it demonstrates the markedly different views both characters have of the visit, and of their different feelings for Hector. At the outset it is, for Sammy, the 'Most futile trip I've ever undertaken' (p. 259). And later, 'Useless offering so long to Hector. He'll always be with me' (p. 261). For Prince, who has 'the look of a man expecting to be saved', it is 'a pilgrimage' (p. 259). Prince's emotional trajectory 'voiced' by Sammy here, is worthy of close attention. As they set

out on a bitingly cold day, Sammy notes that Prince is in buoyant, military mood – he is once again, 'Captain Saddler in command, do or die, death or glory … Prince Jenkin M.C.' (p. 258). Within this frame, Prince appears to have acquired a degree of stoical acceptance of Hector's death, to have recovered his old self. He remembers Hector affectionately as 'the old gladiator' (p. 260). Furthermore, he animatedly acknowledges how Hector helped rejuvenate him, and feels that he has 'become reconciled' to his loss. He is even 'beginning to understand' Jane's feelings toward Hector (p. 260). Words come readily to him. However, when they reach the rock face over which Hector fell, Prince's careful self-reconstruction shakes under the tremors of uncontrolled emotion. In an utterance that resonates with secondary significance, Sammy notes how Prince goes 'close to the rock face, losing himself in deep grey shadow' (p. 261). Standing amid the discarded bloodied swabs used to stanch Hector's broken skull, and hoping for a final catharsis, Prince experiences only a transfiguring moment of grief. It is almost palpable. He becomes lost to the world. Sammy notes how he:

> stooped forward, forearm across his stomach.
> 'What's the matter?' I shouted.
> *Again* no answer (p. 261, my italics).

In this novel of loss and lost love, reference to a different cultural context is again instructive. Once more it is drawn from the world of the warrior, of *agon*, the world of absolute courage, loyalty and love. In *The Iliad*, the warrior Achilles expresses his grief when be mourns the death of his friend Patroklus. In despair, he tells his mother, Thetis, 'what pleasure can I take […] when my dear friend is killed? Patroklus, a man I honoured above all my companions, as much as my own life.'[40] By contrast, Prince experiences a desolation he cannot express and can only respond in frustrated fury when Sammy says it is time to leave. 'Turning on the crouch, definitely mad, he snarled, "Get away from me!"'. In its oblique but fascinating presentation of the deep but scarcely comprehended feelings Prince has for Hector, *So Long, Hector Bebb* appears to ask, what form of discourse is available to a Prince Jenkin Saddler when a repressive, homophobic culture prohibits language from its elementary function of communication? Had they known different times, Prince Saddler – and Gerald Crich – might perhaps have had the words.

Notes

1 All references are to the 2006 Parthian Library of Wales edition of the novel.

2 Emma Smith, for instance, states that it is 'pride against all the odds that aligns Prince and Hector as comrades', *Masculinity in Welsh Writing in English: The cases of Lewis Jones, Glyn Jones, Gwyn Thomas and Ron Berry* (Saarbrücken: VDM Dr Müller, 2009), p. 147.

3 Sarah Morse, 'Maimed Bodies: The Significance of the Body in *So Long, Hector Bebb*', in *Mapping the Territory: Critical Approaches to Welsh Fiction in English*, ed. Katie Gramich (Cardigan: Parthian Books, 2010), pp. 271–7, p. 278.

4 Beside the two films mentioned above there were: *The Colossus of Rhodes* (1961), *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), *Cleopatra* (1963). They followed *Ben Hur* (1959), *Hercules* (1959), *Alexander the Great* (1956) and *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954).

5 *Spartacus*, directed by Stanley Kubrick and starring Kirk Douglas.

6 *The 300 Spartans* starred Richard Egan as the Spartan king Leonidas.

7 Paul Cartledge, *The Spartans: An Epic History* (London: Pan Books, 2003), p. 23.

8 Michael S. Kimmel, *The Gendered Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 204.

9 D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960), pp. 300–11.

10 As Birkin and Crich wrestle, for instance: 'He seemed to penetrate into Gerald's more solid, more diffuse bulk, to interfuse his body through the body of the other …' (pp. 304–5). And, 'Often, in the white interlaced knot of violent living being that swayed silently, there was no head to be seen, only the swift, tight limbs, the solid white backs, the physical junction of two bodies clinched into oneness' (p. 305).

11 Lawrence, *Women in Love*, pp. 310–11.

12 Undated audio interview with Dai Smith, Miners' Library, Swansea University.

13 Lawrence, *Women in Love*, p. 541.

14 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp 26–7.

15 Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p. 1.

16 Sedgwick, *Between Men,* p. 220.

17 Sedgwick, *Between Men*, pp. 1–2.

18 Ron Berry Archive WWE/1/1/3/1, Swansea University.

19 In *Women in Love*, Birkin is more forthright: 'I don't know why one should have to justify oneself', p. 307.

20 Todd W. Reeser: *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 104.

21 Berry credits Hemingway as a writer who influenced him in a 1990 radio interview with Dai Smith, cited in Georgia Burdett and Sarah Morse (eds), *Fight and Flight: Essays on Ron Berry* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2020) p. 5.

22 *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) was first published in Britain in 1960, the same year as *Women in Love*, after a controversial obscenity trial.

23 Mark Spilka, *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), p. 201.

24 Spilka, *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny,* p. 201.

25 Anthony Easthope, *What A Man's Gotta Do* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 53.

26 William Broyles, a Vietnam veteran: 'A comrade in war is a man you can trust with everything because you trust him with your life […] War is the only utopian experience most of us ever have. Individual possessions and advantage count for nothing; the group is everything … It is, simply, brotherly love.' In 'Why Men Love War', *Esquire Magazine*, November 1984. Cited by Varda Burstyn, *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics and the Culture of Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 179.

[27] Jonathan Rutherford, *Forever England*: *Reflections on Masculinity and Empire* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997), p. 31.
[28] Sedgwick, *Between Men,* p. 2.
[29] Victor J. Seidler, 'Rejection, Vulnerability and Friendship', in Peter M. Nardi (ed.), *Men's Friendships* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 1992), pp. 15–34 (p. 17).
[30] Kimmel, *The Gendered Society*, p. 204.
[31] Emma Smith observes that Prince's description is 'notably erotic' but does not follow up the significance of her remark, as she takes her argument in a different direction, *Masculinities in Welsh Writing in English*, p. 42.
[32] Jonathan Rutherford, *Forever England*, p. 31. Perhaps there is a residual echo here of the Prince Saddler character of an earlier draft who had been the product of an elite English education at Winchester College and Oxford, Ron Berry Archive WWE/1/1/3/2.
[33] *Women in Love*, p. 310.
[34] Christopher E. Forth, *Masculinity and the Modern West: Gender, Civilisation and the Body* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 1.
[35] Homer, *The Iliad*, *Book 18*, trans. Martin Hammond (Harmondsworth Middlesex: Penguin Books), pp. 295 and 296. A similar exhibition of grief comes in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Life of Merlin* where Merlin is so overwhelmed by the slaughter at a battle between Peredur and Gwenddoleu that he 'strewed dust on his hair and rent his garments, and prostrate on the ground rolled now hither and now thither'. He is nonetheless 'a king and prophet'. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Life of Merlin*, trans. John Jay Parry (London: Forgotten Books, 2008), pp. 5 and 4.
[36] Burstyn, *The Rites of Men*, p. 176.
[37] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p. 220.
[38] R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991; repr. 1996), p. 112.
[39] Lawrence *Women in Love*, pp. 310–11.
[40] Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 18, p. 297.