

The Outcasts of Time

About writing the book

Even though there are still three months until publication day, I am already being asked the question, 'where did the idea come from?' So far, I've simply said 'I don't remember, it's been such a long time'. But that is not quite true. Some bits I do remember. And because that partial memory is so unsatisfying to me personally, I've done some digging in my computer. You could call it a little personal archaeology.

The original title for the book was *Descending into Heaven*. I have come across a Word file with a very brief plan for a book of that name dated January 2008. The problem is that that plan is for a different story – one that goes backwards in time, not forwards, which I started thinking about *after* I had the idea for *Outcasts*. I believe that I first discussed the idea for *Outcasts* with some friends at a history society Christmas dinner in 2006, but if this is a true memory, it was different then. The reason I can be sure about this is that the idea for the ending comes from a display board in the Elizabethan Merchant's House in Plymouth. I took a photograph of it on the day, 31 May 2008. The section that caught my attention concerned the Plymouth Blitz; it read as follows:

Mr Stapleton was a shop firewatcher, stationed to protect stock and provisions from destruction. He showed remarkable stoicism. "At 11:00pm I heard that my wife and children were killed but I could do nothing about it so I carried on with the work at Marks and Spencers".

This tragic detail set my mind haring off down a narrative path. I remember thinking that my main character would end up alongside Mr Stapleton in Plymouth in 1943. If you've read the book, you'll know that that's not what happens. But an early plan for *Descending into Heaven*, dated June 2010, has that ending. This version started in Moreton on 9 Jan 1349. Day two saw our hero in Lustleigh on 9 Jan 1448; day three in Bovey Tracey on 9 Jan 1547; day four fighting the Battle of Bovey Heath on 9 Jan 1646; day five in Ashburton on 9 Jan 1745; day six travelling to Plymouth on 9 Jan 1844 and day seven in Plymouth on 9 Jan 1943. As this shows, the idea for the ninety-nine year gaps was in place by mid-2010 but there was no thinking about how to deal with the time changes due to the shift from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar in 1752.

By the end of 2010, with Christmas approaching, I jettisoned the idea of gearing the dates around the Battle of Bovey Heath. Another book plan dated 18 December 2010 shows that the idea then was to start on 17 December 1348 and to proceed at ninety-nine-year intervals to the last day of the Exeter Blitz. Not only had Exeter supplanted Plymouth, I had realised I needed to stick to one calendar or the other, and I adjusted the dates so the Julian Calendar remained in force throughout. However, this plan still had days two and three spent in Lustleigh and Bovey Tracey, so the narrative was still in flux.

My next clue regarding the development of the story is an email that I sent to my agent on 21 March 2011. We were about to negotiate the publication of the third and last of my Clarenceux novels, *The Final Sacrament* (written by me as James Forrester). Interestingly, I seem to have changed my mind as to whether the main character is called John or Robert de Wray halfway through the email. I wrote to him:

Novel four is the book I really, REALLY want to write - the book I most want to write of all genres and types - but it is unlike normal historical fiction. I've mentioned it in the past (e.g. 17 Jan 2011 email). It's called 'Descending into Heaven' (the counterpart, if it's successful is 'Ascending into Hell'). 'Descending into Heaven' is about a medieval person, Robert de Wray,

who catches plague/black death on 17 Dec 1348 and sells his soul to the Devil in order to prolong his life, so he can do a good work and be assured of going to Heaven. The Devil says he will prolong his life but cannot grant him more time than the six days he is allotted - all he can do is spread the six days out a little. So the devil brings our Robt de Wray back to live one day every 99 years. John thus is a medieval person who confronts the hell of being a stranger in time - he comes back on 17 Dec 1447 (100 years war still going), 1546 (religious change, printed books), 1645 (civil war, hand guns), 1744 (enlightenment, domestic clocks), 29 Dec 1843 (day changes because of the 1752 calendar, stage coaches, hospitals) and 30 Dec 1942. The last is the last night of the Exeter blitz, where he will help firefighters, make himself useful (like he has not been for the last 595 years) and ultimately be consumed by flames.

Given how I work, that passage suggests I replaced the name 'John' with 'Robert de Wray' – I just failed to update the third mention of the name. Note: this also shows that John/Robert's brother William has yet to make an appearance.

I began the actual writing while on holiday in France, staying at a country house near Loudun in August 2014. A more detailed plan for *Descending into Heaven* dated 8 August that year has the outline of the story more or less as it was written. The main character is still called Robert but his brother William is now part of the narrative. Lustleigh and Bovey Tracey are still the scenes for days two and three but the end of the book is clearly planned. That is crucial: when you know where you are going, you can determine more efficiently how you will get there.

The reason for beginning the book on holiday was that, like most of my books, I simply could not put off starting any longer. I keep backup drafts of every day's work, so I know that on 17 August 2014 I wrote the first four paragraphs, which were as follows:

It was the seventh corpse they had seen that day. And the most harrowing. It stopped John and his brother William in their tracks and forced them to confront a dilemma for which no one could have been prepared.

The first body had been the sort of unfortunate sight that might have been noticed any time, even when the plague was not seeping through the land. He was a bearded man, in his fifties, lying face down on the highway. Normally, either John or William would have sent for the constable to make enquiries as to why and how the man came to die there. In these dark days, however, both simply men pulled their hoods tighter around their heads and walked on. Death was all around them: in the windows overlooking the streets that remained open when dusk forced the living to close their shutters; in the oarless boats that bobbed down the estuary, bumping into banks and quays mindlessly; and in the church bells that did not ring but remained mute, reminding the living that even the tolling of the bell was an act of life. Only the silent bells of their thoughts rang for the dead men and women they had seen over the previous days: and now even those had ceased to toll.

The second body they saw from the road: a man dead in a field. How long he had been there, and how decayed his corpse was, neither man could care. But John, the younger of the two men, found himself wondering who would eventually bury the man. His body would just lie still, folded around the soil, soaking slowly back into the earth as the rains fell and the wild pigs found it and gnawed at it. If anyone survived this plague, he or she might not even have to lift a spade and inter the remains. Maybe they would carry them to consecrated ground; maybe they would just toss them aside or bury them where they were. Life had become so wretched that John could easily believe that man's pig-gnawed bones would lie there until pulled apart by foxes and other vermin, and never be buried except by time itself.

The third body told a sad story. It was a woman, her body twisting on the end of a rope which, it appeared, she had flung over a beam protruding from the eaves of her own cottage, about fifty feet from the edge of the highway. The brothers walked over to look at her: her limp feet were barely three inches off the ground as she turned slowly in the breeze. It was such a narrow gulf between life and death, it seemed to John, as he watched her, and flies settling on her moist, open eyes. He said a prayer for her soul as the leaves rustled in the trees nearby.

And with those four paragraphs, I was away.

Hah! If only it had been that simple.

On 5 September 2014 I retitled the book *The Day of Dying Beauty*. By 8 January 2015 I had completed four chapters – almost half the book. But as I progressed I decided the characters should not speak the same way as the men and women they met in later centuries, so I rewrote the medieval men's parts in Devon dialect. Except that, being medieval, I tried to make it *medieval* Devon dialect – with 'thee' and 'thou' but also such words as 'chell' and 'hast' too and many dialect words. I then decided a better title would be *The Short Version of Forever*. The first full draft was completed at 18.28 on 25 March 2015. I was in tears – but whether that was because I had spent seven months writing an unreadable book or because the emotional impact was overwhelming, I'll leave you to guess.

In truth, I had written a book that very few people would understand. I mean how many people *want to* read a book in Devon dialect? I did write notes on the language, and sought advice from friends, who dutifully said they understood my linguistic choice, and it was fine. But I knew it was a problem. I therefore paid a consultancy to send the text to a professional editor anonymously. Unfortunately, my anonymity meant the said editor presumed I was an enthusiastic beginner and thus her 11-page response was mostly general advice, which was of little use to me. But she applauded the vision, ambition and scope of the book, and its originality. So I gave it a new title, *The Flowers of Time*, gave it a further revision, and sent it to my agent.

My agent did not like it. To cut a long story short, we had to part company. And I had to find a new agent. This took months.

In the meantime, I decided that I would get rid of all the Devon dialect. After that was done, I then decided I needed to eradicate all the 'thee's and 'thou's. The ideas in the book were far more important than its verisimilitude, so out went all the words that were not in modern use. Doing this would also make translation easier. In due course, I teamed up with a new agent, Georgina Capel, and she secured publishing contracts in the UK and USA for the book. UK rights were bought by Clare Hey at Simon and Schuster, and Clare's editorial pen helped the book achieve its final form.

It had taken nine years from the initial planning to publication. But that is not that so very long: I spent thirteen years thinking about *The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England* before I wrote it. And to be honest, I could have spent many more years working on *Outcasts*. However there comes a time in the lifecycle of every book when you just have to say 'I have done my best' and let the story go, like a child leaving home. The love will always be there; the hope and nurturing vision will remain undiminished; but eventually he or she must make his own way in the world. So too it must be with this book. I hope it finds a friend in you.

Ian Mortimer,
Moretonhampstead,
6 March 2017.