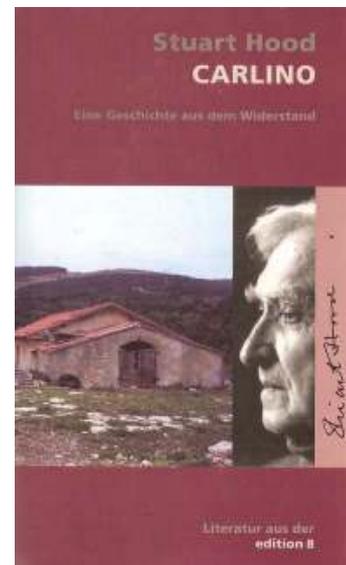


Pebbles from his skull

He was an English officer and leader of an international partisan unit in Italy during the Second World War. After the war, he modernized BBC radio news and was, as Controller of BBC television, responsible for *Z Cars* and *That Was The Week That Was*. As a Professor of Film at the Royal College of Art he supported his students when they squatted the College's building. He translated German and Italian and Russian literature into English.

His eight novels all have a political edge, foreign to the current English literature. Still active at 86, Stuart Hood's recognition as an iconoclastic force in British culture is long overdue. Stefan Howald visited him.



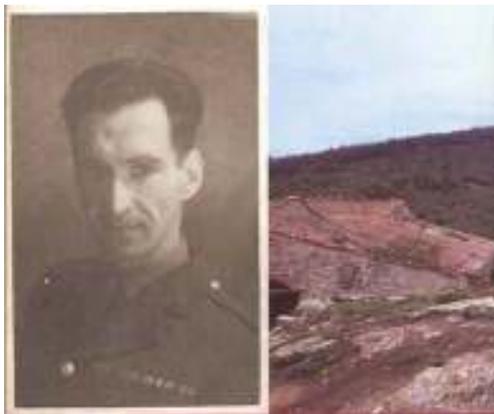
In 1945, as an intelligence officer with the English Army in Germany, Stuart Hood came across a book by German writer Ernst Jünger, a former officer of the discredited Wehrmacht. Hood translated a chapter from Jünger's *Auf den Marmorklippen* (*On the Marble Cliffs*, originally published in 1939), for an intelligence report and visited Jünger afterwards in Hannover. What attracted the left-leaning Hood to Jünger, infamous for his elitist, right-wing celebrations of war? „I had spoken with survivors from the concentration camps. And in a curious way what Jünger said about the concentration camps, without giving them their proper name, was more vivid than the direct reports. There are certain right-wing writers, like Louis-Ferdinand Céline in France and also Jünger, who present you with a slightly different angle“, explains Hood. „Jünger was a dandy, an aristocrat, opposed to the Nazis not because of their politics but because of their crudity. But in his book *Strahlungen* he describes the shooting of a deserter in Paris with a coolness which gives an astonishing insight and is quite frightening at the same time.“

Hood's interest in this incident had a personal pertinence, because he himself ordered the shooting of a deserter. This was a young German soldier who deserted to

Hood's partisan unit in Italy in spring 1944. At least that was what the young German told his captors. But then he tried to provoke the partisans to undertake dangerous missions, so the suspicion grew that he might be a spy and the partisans needed to get rid of him. Hood as the commander in charge sanctioned the shooting. As he did in the case of another boy who joined their forces at a critical moment – an arms drop – under suspicious circumstances. „To this day, these deaths have stayed very much with me“, Hood declared in a recent interview. It is this attentiveness to human considerations, embedded in all his astute political reasoning, which characterises him.

Hood's war experiences were diverse, bewildering, harrowing and deeply shaping his later life. After fighting in Northern Iraq and Abyssinia, he was commissioned to Cairo. There, in an advanced position, he was captured by Italian forces and transferred to a prisoner of war camp in Northern Italy. After the Armistice between the new Italian government, which had overthrown Mussolini, and the Allied Forces he found himself in September 1943 precariously free, hunted by Fascist militia which were still in command in Northern Italy. He crossed the Apennines, partly refugee, partly day-labourer for peasants in exchange for food and shelter, and joined a partisan unit in Tuscany where he fought against Fascists and German troupes, confronted by possible spies and traitors, and the moral dilemma they posed.

It was an existence in „limbo“, as he recalled much later. Already in his youth, he felt slightly at odds with the norm, an outsider. Stuart Hood was born in Scotland in 1915. His father worked as a head teacher in a small Scottish town and was, according to his son, „a man of the Enlightenment“, with a strong interest in



foreign languages. Stuart started to learn German at the age of eight, followed by French. At Edinburgh University, he joined some leftwing circles and eventually the Young Communists, the Spanish civil war being the catalyst for his generation. He had begun to teach, but soon the Second World War found him ready for action.

„My army career was very strange. I volunteered in 1940. I went to a recruiting office and they asked, <what can you do?> I said, <well, I can speak French and German.> So I became a driver in the engineers. Very strange. Later, I applied to

„My army career was very strange. I volunteered in 1940. I went to a recruiting office and they asked, <what can you do?> I said, <well, I can speak French and German.> So I became a driver in the engineers. Very strange. Later, I applied to

become an officer. I was interviewed by a Colonel, who had been at the Embassy in Moscow. In my last year at university I had done a little bit of Russian. He asked me, <what does Pravda mean?> I said, <truth>, and he said, <right>: That's how I got my commission.“

The anecdote is typical of Hood's slightly self-mocking style, which combines sharp observation with wit and humour. In an interview with the cultural magazine *The Printer's Devil* he described his work with Enigma, the decoding system of recent film fame: „I had been in intelligence in Cairo for a few months. I was aware that my commanding officer had access to some source of intelligence I didn't know about. I knew I was feeding him stuff that then came back in strange forms. I kept a card index of all the names of officers in the German Afrikakorps. He would come out to me and say – have you ever heard of so-and-so? And I'd say, yes. For instance, one of the people he came and asked me about one day was Almassy who featured in *The English Patient*. And I said, yes, he's Hungarian and he's on Rommel's Staff. They said – find out all you can about him. We think he's got some connection with the western desert. So I went to the Turf Club, among whose members were people who had been exploring the desert before the war, and they said – yes, sure, he was a desert explorer, in fact he wrote a book about it. So I went into Cairo University Library and got the book. It was in French. In it he starts off by saying: <Herodotus says that every year hundreds of amphorae and vases go to Egypt and disappear.> Almassy then says – I believe they were used to store water in the desert. So I then wrote a paper saying I thought that if Almassy was doing anything, he was laying down dumps of petrol, something of that kind, in the desert. So they sent out planes and picked up tracks. In fact he was dropping German agents across the desert, into the Upper Nile. This is why in the film there is a reference to Herodotus which is quite unexplained otherwise. The whole story of *The English Patient* arises from this guy. Now, obviously, my boss in his inner office knew about Almassy. Knew it from Enigma, from that source that nobody would tell me about. Knew about him already, but needed me to be able to corroborate it and say – yes, this is it.“

After the desert came the capture and winter in the Apennines, the liberation of Italy, and, interrupted by a short return to England, the crossing of the Rhine with the American army and finally intelligence work in defeated Germany. After the war, Hood wrote two short novellas situated in an imaginary country, in which he tried to come to terms with his experiences, with violence against others. Then one novel

proper, *Since the Fall*, published in 1955. This brings the history forward, showing the confrontation between two former friends during the Cold War which at that time froze politics and personal relationships. But Hood was not content with these early books and regards them as an unsuccessful attempt at burying ghosts. „I think I couldn't cope with it. When I came back to England in 1944, I suffered what people now call post-traumatic shock. Some things I was pushing back. I could give a narrative of what had happened, but I couldn't deal with the effect on me. This precarious situation when one lives from day to day, with the necessity of killing other people, had to be thought about quite a long time.“

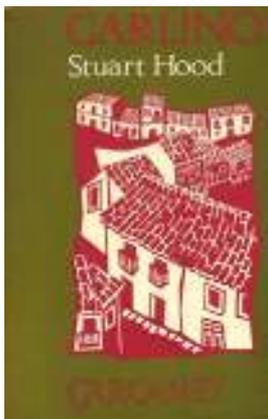
In the meantime Hood had started a career as a journalist with the German Service at what was then the BBC's European Service. He later was promoted to head of the Italian Service. Then, one day, he was asked if he wanted to work under Hugh Carleton Greene as deputy head of news at the BBC Domestic Service, with another Greene-protégé, David Edwardes, as head of news. „It was a coup d'état. Carleton Greene's view was that the BBC had fallen behind. And our job was to test, to see how far we could go. Try what happens, that was his attitude.“

The revolution started with small steps. „In my early days in the Domestic Service I was presented with the text of the six o'clock bulletin and it began with some minor royalty going on holidays. I said, <what are these boring people doing at the head of the news bulletin?> I was told, <Royal stories have to be in the bulletin.> <Not with me>, I said. Some people cheered and some were distressed. But the BBC was in serious need of a change.“ When Hugh Greene became Director-General of the BBC Hood was, in 1959, appointed Controller of Television. „The number of television sets was rising and so was the income of the BBC. Therefore Greene wasn't worried about finances, he didn't have to go begging to politicians for more funds. He was in a very powerful position. And we took the view, if the BBC was publicly funded, it had to find a wider audience.“ Hood commissioned *Z Cars*, the first innovative British police series which brought a new realism to the genre and ran from January 1962 to 1978 in 667 weekly episodes. He was able to encourage people like Tony Garnett, David Mercer and Ken Loach. He introduced the first female newsreader. And he started *That Was The Week That Was*, the ground-breaking satire, made by people who „knew what happened inside the machine. The main problem with it, however, was not so much politics, but with what the Board of Governors puritanically thought of as smut. I had to apologize for all this dirty talk.“ *Z Cars* had

its unforeseen effect as well. After initial fury, the police started to like the series and adopted its tough image.

Was Hood the red under the bed of Cold War paranoia? Asa Briggs, in his official history of British Broadcasting, grudgingly acknowledges Hood's sharp intelligence and notes that Hood as a Marxist with his emphasis on the contemporary social situation provided the best interpretation as to why Hugh Greene was able to expand and liberate the BBC. Hood relates the quote with relish. During his work at the BBC, he didn't feel much political pressure on him personally. Political vetting, officially denied, was going on but was not very efficient. Hood's war-time credentials were impeccable. His membership of the Communist party had lapsed a long time before. At the end of the war he had learned from Russian prisoners of war what fate would await them in front of Stalin's firing squads or in his labour camps. Left-leaning without party affiliation, Hood was once again an outsider.

But his own past was not over and done with. In 1963, Hood wrote *Pebbles from my skull*, an autobiographical account of his time in Italy, which was some twenty years later re-published under the title *Carlino*, the nom de guerre given to him by his Italian partisan comrades. „I wanted to do two things. Firstly, give a picture of peasant life. I felt indebted to my peasants who had sheltered me, and admiration for them. The other thing was to make sense of what had happened. I discovered new facts I hadn't understood at the time. This in itself raised the question of remembrance and how one shapes memory, its truth and gaps.“ The fragments of the past, he wrote, are washed by the tide of time, till they are ground smooth: pebbles from the skull.



Carlino is a slim volume, barely 150 pages. It is a beautiful, haunting book, written in a language which is stripped to its essentials and at the same time is analytical and erudite. Elegiac in its first part, *Carlino* describes and celebrates a rural lifestyle which has since disappeared. Tragic and humane in its second part, it probes life and death in adversity. Hood abstains from any triumphalism in the face of the Fascist defeat. He portrays harrowing scenes of death and solidarity, betrayal and moral probing.

Carlino garnered praise, but some years later it was overshadowed by another book: *Love and War in the Apennines* (1971) by the well-known travel writer Eric Newby. Newby had been a prisoner of war in the same camp as Hood, in fact he

describes Hood, anonymously, as the outsider sticking out among all the Colonel Blimps' who found him „Bolshie and odd“, „not because he was not a good soldier, which they had to admit he was, but because every opinion he held was completely at variance with their own“.

Newby's book recounts a similar moving tale of helpful peasants, but Hood's experiences in the resistance are supplanted by a love story between Newby and a Slovenian refugee in Italy. One can see why *Love and War in the Apennines* was commercially more successful than Hood's book about War and Politics in the Apennines. Newby tells his story well, but Hood's book is vastly superior, in language and moral scope.

Shortly after publication of his book, Hood became disenchanted with the BBC and left in June 64. This created quite a stir. The *Sunday Times*, under the headline *Why Hood Hit the Roof*, cited his criticism of the BBC's bureaucracy and the hypocrisy concerning its supposed political independence. For a short time Hood worked with the private company Rediffusion, the London franchise of the ITV-network. „Their meetings always started with figures about short-term loans, and the programmes were discussed at the very end.“ One of the stars of Rediffusion was Hughie Green, but when Hood declared he would take Green off the air, because he found his programme tawdry, his own days at Rediffusion were numbered. He moved on and became a freelance film producer and writer, implementing Brechtian techniques in films on Guy Fawkes and the Chicago Seven, later working on *The World at War*. And he wrote books which became classics in the new field of Media Studies, *A Survey of Television* (1967) and *The Mass Media* (1972).

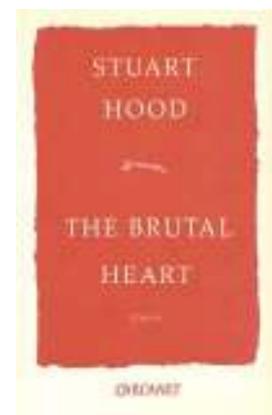
In 1972 he was appointed Professor of Film at the Royal College of Art. „I tried two things: democratizing the school, and opening the discussion on general problems of film. We didn't have any experience in democracy, so we caused total uproar. For instance, we managed a ratio of fifty-fifty between men and women in two years of positive discrimination. The teaching staff hated it. And then I started a debate on the nature of film, on the antagonism between commercial film and artistic film. We discussed the conventions of Hollywood film-making and connected to the general movement in Britain at that time to explore film, its social purpose and the way you can see things differently.“ In 1976, during a protest action, his students occupied the administrative building. „The professors discussed whether the police should be called, and the rector said to me, <Professor Hood I see you are in a

minority of one. That is a very honourable position.> The next day we discussed my resignation.“

During this time Hood wrote another novel, *In and Out the Windows* (1974). It is quite a daring attempt. The first person narrator, a TV director in his forties, recounts his psychoanalytical sessions, his sexual fantasies and his political as well as professional disillusion. The book is an indirect reflection of an episode in Hood's life he is not very proud of but nevertheless accepts as part of his history: a short flirtation with the infamous Workers' Revolutionary Party (WRP). During his time as a freelance filmmaker, around 1970, Hood got involved in the filmmakers' union and, encountering the control of the union by Stalinist CP-cadres, he was drawn towards the WRP as the „most intelligent critics of the CP-line“.

The Workers' Revolutionary Party occupies a strange room in the house which is English left-wing history. There is the larger-than-life figure of Gerry Healey who could entice Vanessa and Corin Redgrave as well as other actors and intellectuals into his orbit, only to be exposed as a crook and a sexual predator. In the early and mid-seventies, Healey and his band of unlikely revolutionaries played a certain part in British politics and culture; indeed, in the winter of 1973, a play by Trevor Griffith, *The Party*, premiered at the National Theatre with Laurence Olivier scantily disguised as Healey. At that time, Hood's involvement was already finished. „When the leadership locked the door to force a meeting to vote, I felt it was time to quit“, he explains.

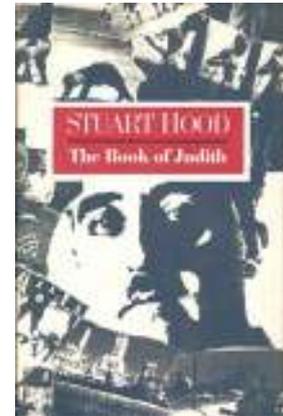
After WPR and the Royal College of Art, he was an outsider again who couldn't fit in. But he doesn't think that this is the natural position of an intellectual. „No, not at all. If I could have found a place, I would have been happy, but I couldn't discover a space where I was free enough to be myself and yet carry on some political work.“ At the beginning of the 1980s, he felt somewhat at a loss. Politically and socially disillusioned, he moved to Brighton, and suddenly, he found space for writing again. In *A Storm from Paradise*, published in 1985 by the small independent Manchester publisher Carcanet, he went back to his own family history. Hood rates it his best novel. At the beginning of the 20th century, a teacher in Scotland falls in love with an East European socialist refugee; but his love is not strong enough to overcome the



prejudices of his upbringing. *A Storm from Paradise* is not only an evocation of Scotland in the first half of the 20th century but also, as are all of Hood's books, a novel of ideas. His following work, *The Upper Hand* (1987), moved forward in time, shows another confrontation of two friends and former political allies in the Cold War during the sixties.

„I was always interested in how politics is lived“, Hoods explains. One of his most topical books is *The Brutal Heart* (1989) about German urban terrorists. He met some of the members of what became later the Rote-Armee-Fraction, the so called Baader-Meinhof-Gang, at the London house of exiled German poet Erich Fried. Hood got to know Fried way back in the 1940s and lived, in the 1950s, for a couple of years in the same house. Later, he translated Fried's poems into English. In the 1970s, Fried's London address became a meeting point for disenchanted German youths, some of them drifting towards terrorism. *The Brutal Heart* shows „this strange mixture of idealism and pushing things over the edge, beyond rationality.“ Is this notion valid for today's situation after September the eleventh? „Absolutely. Terrorism is the symptom, not the illness. That's why the present War against Terrorism is such a nonsense. Terrorism is a weapon of the weak. If you're confronted with an immensely strong enemy and you're desperate to do something, than you may resort to terrorism.“

Terrorism is also a theme in Hood's last published novel, *Book of Judith*, in 1995. In a complex form, it binds together different strands. At the time of General Franco's death, an English filmmaker and his assistant and girlfriend visit Spain and are confronted with Spain's present and past. The filmmaker, a member of a revolutionary workers' party in England, becomes entangled in helping Spanish comrades with an assassination attempt, whereas his girlfriend is looking for traces of her father who vanished in Spain during the civil war. „I wanted to explore the moral problem of a difficult idea like critical solidarity. How far can one go?“, explains Hood. And in the figure of the girlfriend he articulates a feminist critique of male politics, be it left-wing or right-wing. A female perspective has always been a strong strand in his work, influenced by his mother.



From 1985 to 1995, Hood published five novels. At the same time, he produced the texts of non-fictional, illustrated books: *Fascism for Beginners*, *Marquis*

de Sade for Beginners and, together with an Israeli friend, *Introducing the Holocaust* which was attacked by conservative Jewish groups in the USA because of critical remarks about the Israeli government. Furthermore, Hood's astonishing productivity during these years includes translations of works by Pier Paolo Pasolini, Dario Fo and other Italian authors.

At 86, he is still as active as ever. An autobiographical account, *The Seeds of Time*, which takes Hood's own story up to the sixties, remains with a fairly well-known independent publisher. But the publisher has run out of money and, living in Paris, is evasive with his correspondence. Two further novels are finished, awaiting publication. „One respected English publisher liked one of the manuscripts very much, but they want to invest in younger writers“, Hood laughs.

From the 1980s onwards, he visited the places in Italy where he lived and fought as a partisan and became embroiled in a political struggle about the Italian resistance. „I have been in the situation where I went into a bar and my Italian friend said to a woman, <this is Carlino>, and she said, <mai esistito (but he never existed)>. People from the university of Florence did some oral history, and they said, <we might find that certain people will resist you>. Because there is this element of memory and locked memory. And the whole central episode of the book, the battle of Campi Bisenzio has become a legend. Certain people have personal and political stakes in it. When I go back to Campi Bisenzio, I find myself built into this legend. I have taken part in several celebrations and have to be very careful where I walk in the procession. Because the two successor parties of the old CP, the Partito Democratico Socialista and the Partito Rifondazione Comunista, both want me. So I try to walk in the middle.“

Last summer, tax-dodger Silvio Berlusconi was voted into power in Italy in a coalition with Neo-Fascists. To Hood, who risked his life fighting against Fascism in Italy, this is most depressing. He accepts a failure of the Left to deal with the disappointments of its traditional clientele and the ambitions of a younger generation. And the new global situation, dominated by the US-led War against Terrorism, has restricted the possibilities of alternative developments, for instance the new anti-globalization-movement. Nevertheless, Hood still thinks of himself as a Marxist and holds that „there must be a better system for people to live under than Capitalism.“ What makes this position more than just a futile declaration is Hood's insistence on individual responsibility for political actions.

His own experiences from the partisan war in Italy still haunt him. All his books deal with the moral ambiguity of human actions. He gives me another example: „In January 1945 I dealt with a request from the Canadian Army about possible measures against German supply which was coming through by a particular railway track. I got out my aerial map and saw the railway track going through a small town, evaluated it and said, you would need fifteen bombers. So they sent fifteen bombers to take out the centre of the town, and who knows how many deaths it caused.“ In his novels even the most ethically conscious figures are affected by violence.

But art, and especially literature, is the one saving grace, Hood maintains: „I write about what puzzles me. Literature can deal better with ambiguities. Novels can show the complexity of human reactions.“