The Writings of Penny Smith Logan

A novel by

D. R. Evans

CONTENTS

Introduction

I never knew Penny Smith Logan; she waited until after her death to approach me. In early May of 1988 I received a letter from an attorney's office in South Dakota that informed me simultaneously of her existence, her demise and of a provision in her will in which she bequeathed me the contents of a trunk.

I telephoned the lawyer, protesting that an error must have been made, as I had no knowledge of anyone by the name of Penny Logan. The attorney, however, was adamant that I was the indeed the intended beneficiary, as the will contained a quite explicit description; when he read to me this description, which included the titles of some of my earlier works, I had to concede the point, although he could shed no light on the mystery of *why* I was a beneficiary.

In answer to my questions concerning Ms. Logan herself he seemed evasive, although perhaps that was merely my interpretation of the perfunctory manner in which a busy man answers questions in which he sees no profit. The only pertinent information he surrendered was that my benefactrix had been the daughter of M. L. Smith, the well-known novelist.

The attorney confirmed my mailing address and informed me that the trunk would be dispatched shortly.

The question of why I had been chosen to receive the rather unusual bequest was answered almost as soon as I laid eyes on the contents of the

trunk a few days later. It was filled with journals, papers, newspaper cuttings, piles of hand-written notebooks and what I estimated to be several hundred audio cassette tapes. Neatly taped to the underside of the trunk lid was a slightly yellowed envelope with my name written on the outside in what is usually described as "a firm hand." I removed the envelope, opened it and read the brief note that was folded inside:

12 May, 1988

Dear Mr. Evans,

Please forgive my forwardness in bequeathing you this trunk and its contents. You will find recorded in these materials the thoughts, actions, hopes, fears, joys and sorrows of a human life. I have read with delight some of your fictional works and would hope that you may be able to use some of the contents of this trunk in plotting or characterization in future novels. If you find the contents to be unsuitable, please feel free to destroy or otherwise dispose of my bequest; by the time this reaches you, I shall be well past feeling abused by such an action on your part.

Yours sincerely,

Penny Smith Logan.

The signature was accomplished in a very different handwriting from that in which the remainder of the missive was drafted; instead of the firm, forthright characters of the text, the letters of the signature were shaky and almost childlike. Clearly, the bulk of the letter had been committed to paper by someone other than the signatory. But as my thoughts moved from the form of the letter to its contents — and here I must make a confession — my heart sank as I realized that what I had been left was the life story of this unknown person.

One of the burdens that must be borne by writers who have enjoyed some success is an intermittent stream of written material from unpublished "writers" who aspire to a similar happy state. This particular case, of course, was unique in an essential way: the writer, being deceased, could not hope to benefit from any imprimatur that I might be able to bestow. But, by the same token, the fact of Ms. Logan's demise thrust on me a sense of obligation which otherwise would have been absent. So, although I had no desire to sort through the papers,

notebooks and tapes, much less absorb their contents, I felt that such was the least that I could do for Ms. Logan.

The task of sorting through the written and audio material was considerably less burdensome than I had at first feared. Beginning and ending dates were clearly marked on each notebook and tape. Most of the notebooks were written in shorthand — I was grateful, not for the first time, for my early training as a reporter — and each book or tape, I quickly found, was completely filled. After several hours of sorting, I was satisfied that I had the contents of the trunk, now strewn around the floor of my office, in a reasonable approximation to chronological order. I picked up the first of several notebooks bearing dates in the early seventies and marked "My Earliest Years," and began to read.

What I absorbed over the following weeks was the life story of an extraordinary woman. In many ways she was unexceptional; she was, like most of us, battered and bruised by life as it encountered her; to the most important questions which raised themselves she had no certain answers. But in all of this, two indications of extraordinariness shone through: she made a record of *everything*; and she had an alarmingly unrelenting intellect which showed itself in a remarkable ability to detach herself from her emotions and ask, especially during times of crisis, that most important of questions: what is life *really* about?

For several weeks I spent every spare moment digesting her words until, when they ended, I felt a sense of loss that mere words had rarely invoked in me before.

In total, I estimate that I had read well over three million words written by, for, or about Penny Smith Logan, and listened to perhaps as many words again from the audio tapes. This was far too much material to be used as the basis for a character, or even several characters. But it could form the basis of a book about Penny herself. So, with as careful an eye as I could muster for veracity, objectivity and fairness, I began to cull the paper and the tapes.

If I had understood the enormity of the task I had set myself, I probably would never have begun. In the early drafts, this book approached a thousand pages. No publisher was interested in such a tome. At one point, I was so discouraged that I almost gave up. But then I walked into my office and looked at everything that Penny had left me, and I knew that surrender was not an option. So once more I set to cutting, trying to smooth over the gaps in such a way

as to preserve as much of possible of Penny's spirit. This book is the result. I believe that it is true to the spirit of its original author as much as is possible given the constraints imposed by the circumstances of publication. I have attempted to include some (although far fewer than I originally desired) of the unimportant events related in Penny's journal, along with those that were more obviously important to her; most of Penny's biases as they appeared to me are preserved; in almost all cases, I have preserved her own words — occasionally correcting grammar or Americanizing her spelling where necessary — even at the cost of retaining the youthful, immature writing style of her earlier years.

In some cases I have, as seamlessly as possible, added background to passages that appear here. Generally, such material is taken from other journal entries, otherwise unreproduced, and is inserted where it is needed to understand the correct context of events, places or emotions. On rare occasions, I have taken the liberty of inserting editorial comments into Penny's text, usually to explain an uncommon word or phrase. All such cases are clearly distinguished typographically *[like this]* or in footnotes*.

In the course of her life, Penny wrote a considerable number of poems, many of which were dated and preserved in her bequest. Some of these have been published before†; in this work I have included a representative selection of those poems which have not been previously published; with a single exception, none of those which are otherwise available in print are included here.

In conclusion, this book is dedicated to the memory of Penelope Cordwell Smith Logan. May she forgive me my errors and omissions; and may she never be forgotten.

D. R. Evans,
Colorado,
September, 1995.

* like this.

† *Poesies* by Penny Smith Logan, published by Slithy Toves Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1984.

Ponselby

The Dale Village

Some would call it sleepy,
Some would pass it by,
Some would deride its peaceful slumber —
Not I.

In a world of rapid change
And stormy, conflicting demands,
Unyielding to time's attack
The quiet village stands.

For no matter how near or how far
In this huge world one might roam
Nowhere compares with Ponselby,
Nowhere compares with home.

— Penny Smith
12 March, 1970

For some time, I was convinced that I had failed the exam, simply because of my error on that one question — a tendency which still haunts me to this day. A month or so later, two well-dressed gentlemen came to school and interviewed two of the candidates: Cindy and a boy named Michael Williams. Mrs. Goldsmith was careful to explain to Wendy and me privately that only borderline candidates were interviewed, and we should read nothing into the fact that we were not chosen for interviews; it meant merely that we were firmly on one side or the other of the dividing line.

The results were published towards the end of term: Wendy and I were the only candidates to have passed. So, come autumn, Wendy and I would be travelling to the Glendown Grammar School for Girls, while the others would be travelling in the opposite direction, to the coeducational Pontereen Secondary Modern School.

Mum and Dad were delighted with my performance, although, as my mother once confided to me: "there was never any doubt in our minds that you were going to pass; we just didn't want to put any pressure on you." The family all went out for a grand meal in Harrogate to celebrate, and my parents bought me a beautiful watch, which I still wear, engraved on the back in tiny letters: "Congratulations, Penny. Love, Mum and Dad."

That summer, for the first time in many years, we had no summer holiday away from home. Dad was finding it difficult to complete his latest book and, in addition, he was beginning to be in demand for radio shows of one sort or another, so it was agreed that we would give our holiday a miss just this once and simply relax in our own back yard, so to speak.

I think that Dad must have been going through a lean patch during this time. Until I was eleven or so, he had produced a book every couple of years or so. Not all were great successes (in fact, I can find no obvious correlation between whether I think one of his books is good and whether it sold well), but he has always maintained that he has been happy with each of his products.

But by 1963 he had gone four years without producing a book. I asked him once whether he had just been out of ideas or whether there was an unpublished manuscript from this era in which he had been unable to interest a publisher. His response was noncommittal, but I suspect that the latter is the truth. After four years, he was beginning

to feel considerable pressure to produce a saleable manuscript, and he was determined that he would take no extended time off from his writing until he had succeeded. In the midst of his writing, however, he was thrilled to receive, and to accept, an offer from the BBC to take part in the radio program *Any Questions**.

It was strange to hear Dad on the radio. The show was recorded on a weekday evening, but broadcast at lunchtime on Saturday, giving the whole family an opportunity to gather around the radio in the lounge after an early lunch to listen to Dad expounding his views on the topics of the day. There was one question on the influence of pop music on culture, and I was overjoyed to hear Dad mention my name in his response to the question.

So, while his writing career was temporarily in a quagmire, he began to pursue the opportunities that came his way as a member of the pool of people that the BBC uses for its various panel programs. He was invited to be a guest on several of these shows, including some quiz shows, and he rapidly became a perennial favorite on *Twenty Questions*†. I had never thought of my father as being particularly humorous — a necessary quality for participation in most of these shows — but I discovered that he had an attractive radio personality, and he would often interject a quick quip or gibe against the questionmaster or members of the opposing team, rendering him a favorite with the shows' audiences.

So my summer between primary and grammar school passed relatively uneventfully. The weather was pleasant, relatively dry by undemanding English standards, and my mother, Jonathan and I took frequent day-long hikes high on the fells or in nearby valleys. At least twice a week, we would pack an enormous lunch into a picnic hamper. Then, when

* *Any Questions* is the longest running weekly program produced by BBC radio. It is a half hour show in which distinguished panel members from various walks of life (usually connected with politics or the entertainment industry) are asked to respond to questions, occasionally humorous, more usually serious, raised by the general public. The show travels from town to town around the United Kingdom and is recorded live and edited for broadcast.

† A light, jocular program in which panelists attempt to discover the identity of a chosen object or abstract idea with twenty or fewer questions to each of which the answer must be "yes" or "no."

all was ready, Mum would often spread the Ordnance Survey one-inch map on the dining room table and we would search the map, looking for an unvisited but inviting location suitable for a secluded picnic lunch. Other times, we would simply get in the car after breakfast and drive around, stopping every now and then to leave the car by the roadside while we took a walk. Then, come lunchtime, out would come the map, spread out on the grass of some high moor or by the bank of a rivulet, and we would search out the nearest pub in which to stop to purchase ploughman's lunches. Mum would make a game of it sometimes, producing the map when we complained about incipient hunger and thrusting the challenge upon us: "Navigate us to a pub and then you can eat." Occasionally, to make the challenge more difficult, she would insist that we kept our eyes closed for several minutes as she drove along narrow dale lanes, so that Jonathan and I would have no idea of our location when Mum finally produced the map. It was a summer of relaxation and fun, and somehow it more than made up for the lack of a real holiday.

As the summer progressed, I became more and more excited about the upcoming term at my new school. But I was also somewhat anxious; I would be leaving almost all my friends behind, and also going from a school of thirty pupils to one more than ten times the size. Instead of being five minutes' walk from school, I would have to ride a bus for half an hour each way. There was the consolation that Jonathan would be riding the bus with me — the boys' grammar school being adjacent to the girls' — but still there was a not-inconsiderable degree of anxiety associated with those last couple of weeks of the 1963 summer holiday.

A few days before the new term was set to begin, on a glorious early September morning when the pellucid blue of the sky was matched only by the golden yellow of the sun and the verdant green of the fields, Dad popped his head around the architrave of my bedroom door and asked if I wanted to go for a walk with him. I jumped at the unexpected chance to be alone with him, and in two minutes we were striding out across the meadow behind the house, parting a path through the buttercups and daisies which were making the most of the late-summer warmth, sunning themselves to the accompaniment of the low drone of bees collecting nectar.

We began to climb out of the valley, Dad striding out, a weathered hazel branch in his hand for show and striking the ground with every

step; I ran ahead until I became absorbed in watching a flower, a bee, a beetle or snail, so that Dad would pass me by and I would have to run to catch up once more.

We came to a halt, short of breath, halfway up the fell, where we rested on the short, sheep-cropped grass, the village spread out below us.

After a couple of minutes, Dad asked, "Have you given any thought to what you might want to do when you grow up?"

The question surprised me, and I considered it while I watched Mr. Harmon's ancient, rickety delivery van, the legend "Harmon of Ponselby — Fruiterer and Greengrocer" make its way sluggishly out of the village on the Pontereen road.

Jonathan had known since the age of seven that he wanted to be a scientist of some kind, and it was already clear from his marks at school that he excelled in maths and physics and was on his way towards fulfilling his ambition. But my mind was not as clear. I, too, had done well at primary school in arithmetic, but in the course of the last year I felt that I had come to appreciate words with a fervor that numbers had never instilled. So I demurred, telling my father that I did not know yet, but possibly one day I would try to be a writer like him.

He grew very serious at my response, and asked what sort of books I might like to write.

I had no idea, of course. My essays had earned good marks at school, but a primary school story about what I did over the weekend was hardly the same as a full-length novel, and I was old enough to be aware of that truth.

I confessed to him that I had a soft spot for poetry. He seemed surprised at this, and I realized that I had never before told him about the emotions that poetry could evoke in me. He told me that I should never hope to make any money writing poetry, but I should write it only because I felt driven to do so; he also gave me his opinion that the best poetry appears to have been put together effortlessly, almost as if it had always existed, just waiting for someone to discover it and write it down. This was a new thought to me and, at the time, I was very suspicious of its truth, although I am now more than half inclined to agree with him. I had never tried my hand at writing poetry, and had assumed that it would be much like writing an essay, except easier

because it was shorter, but at the same time more difficult because of the need to maintain rhythm and find rhymes.

We sat, watching the view, drinking in the day, chatting about nothing in particular. Mr. Harmon's van disappeared over a bridge and around a corner into the woods, to be replaced as a source of interest by a distant train crawling out of the tunnel hacked into Scarfell. The train wound around the hump of the fell and soon joined the van out of sight behind the woods.

A few days later, on the day before the new school term was due to begin, and after a trip down to London for one of his radio shows, Dad presented me with a small package.

"Open it," he said.

It contained three small books and a copy of *She Loves You*, the latest Beatles record. The first two books were paperback anthologies of English poetry; the third was larger, empty, and looking much like an unused exercise book.

"That's your diary cum journal," he told me as I puzzled over this last book. "Or, at least, the first volume of it. If you are going to be a writer, you need somewhere to write everything down. And you should make a record of *everything*. It should be a permanent record of all that happens to you: all your thoughts, all your feelings, all that life throws your way, all of your responses. Because when you eventually get down to writing seriously, you'll find that there is no richer source for inspiration than your own life. But you'll also discover that, without a journal, much of that life will pass you by without leaving any record, even in your own mind. You will discover, in retrospect, that only a small part of your life lives on in memory unless you have a written record to jog that memory. I began my journal only after I left college, after a friend encouraged me to start one, and I soon realized that the biggest mistake I ever made was not to have started earlier. You are old enough now, and you should begin immediately."

I asked if I could see his journal, but he shook his head firmly. "No, Penny, no one sees my journal, not even your mother, and that's how it should be. The only way to be completely honest in your journal is if you know that no one else will ever read it. The only other rule I have is that I make some kind of entry every day; sometimes weeks go by

when nothing much gets recorded, just daily entries of a few words to show that I made the effort; other times I may spend several evenings in a row doing nothing but writing in the journal. Nowadays I usually type when I have a lot to say, but even so it sometimes takes the better part of a week to lay all my thoughts about some subjects down on to paper. I'm on my seventy-third volume now...." He sounded almost proud.

"Do you often go back and read old entries?" I asked.

"Not as often as I used to," he admitted. He paused and looked thoughtful, as if an idea had come to him. "But perhaps it's high time I went through some of those old entries again; maybe it would help out with my current book. You know, it's a funny thing, but if you keep at it, I'm sure you'll be as amazed as I've been to discover later in life that whenever you think you have a bright, spanking new idea, you'll probably find that you first came across it twenty years earlier and it's recorded somewhere in your journal...."

The first entry in my first journal is dated on that day: Monday, 2 September, 1963.

But there was one other event that occurred during those final days of the summer holidays. My conversation with Dad had induced me to make a serious attempt at writing a poem. I still have that very first effort, inspired by the sight of the distant train from our resting place on the fell, dated 30 August, 1963, and I still remember the disillusionment that set in when I realized that my father was right — writing good poetry is *much* harder than writing an essay.

First View of a Yorkshire Dale

A vale, swathed in green
Of grass and tree is seen
By eyes accustomed to city blight
And heart beats gladly at the sight.

The sun, breaking through
Shines light upon the view
And glistens off the rain-soaked ground
And speaks of beauty without a sound.

Dots, across the vale
And, against the green, pale,
Sheep and lambs move across the hill
Leaving the shadow of the fell.

Far away, a puff
Of smoke; small, but enough
To betray the presence of a train
Entering heaven once again.

Travellers, on their way
To a distant locale; do they
Gaze in awestruck wonder, like me,
In the face of such serenity?

I showed the poem to Dad, although I felt rather uncomfortable doing so. He was good enough to be encouraging, and went to great pains to point out that he was an author of fiction, not a critic of poetry. As I reread it now, eight and a half years later, I realize that he was probably overly gentle with me. Still, there are a few good lines: I like the first two lines of the first stanza and also the phrase "speaks of beauty without a sound", but the remainder is embarrassingly flawed. I wanted to evoke a picture and, if possible, an emotion in the reader, so that he could feel as I felt, looking across the dale when I first voiced an intimation that poetry might be more than a passing interest in my life. Of course, I didn't succeed; but how could the words of an eleven-year-old have done so?

Monday, 2 September, 1963

This is the first entry in my journal. Dad presented me with this journal today, along with two collections of English poetry and a copy of *She Loves You*, as a sort of congratulation for starting my new school tomorrow.

I have butterflies in my stomach about tomorrow. I'm glad that Jonathan and Wendy will be on the bus with me; I wonder if Wendy will be in my class.