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“Alan Sillitoe (1928-2010)”

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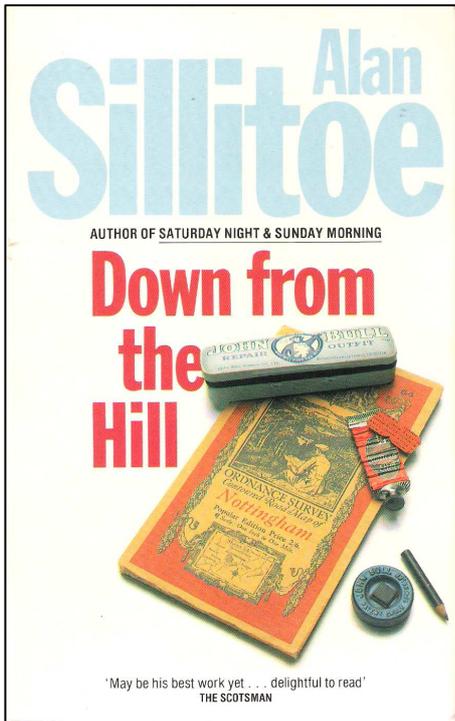
The Charles Close Society was founded in 1980 to bring together all those with an interest in the maps and history of the Ordnance Survey of Great Britain and its counterparts in the island of Ireland. The Society takes its name from Colonel Sir Charles Arden-Close, OS Director General from 1911 to 1922, and initiator of many of the maps now sought after by collectors.

The Society publishes a wide range of books and booklets on historic OS map series and its journal, *Sheetlines*, is recognised internationally for its specialist articles on Ordnance Survey-related topics.

Alan Sillitoe (1928-2010)

David Archer

Read Alan Sillitoe's autobiography¹, and you will agree that maps were important to him throughout his life. 'My interest in maps, navigation and geography has persisted...' Maps and map reading. Making and drawing maps. Using maps. Maps and air charts. Maps in guide books. Maps, guide books, foreign countries, military and writing, these are the things I associate with the late Alan Sillitoe, Charles Close Society member 720.



I made contact with Alan at the end of 1986, after he had disposed of a large part of his map collection, including most of his Ordnance Survey maps,² but from the maps I bought and those he mentioned in letters and conversation, I would suggest that he had built a wide ranging collection, rambling even. Like so many of us, he appeared to have a weakness for an attractive or interesting map of anywhere, although Nottingham, military and 1:1,000,000 maps were his prime targets when I knew him in later life. He was very interested in foreign countries and collected travel guides, especially Baedekers, loving the maps within.

During our initial exchanges, Alan asked about First World War trench maps, which were obviously of almost passionate interest. He bought a copy of Peter Chasseaud's recently published first book³ and was given the author's address. When Peter published his trench map atlas,⁴ Alan wrote a preface and was at the May 1999 AGM to hear Peter speak on 'Survey on the Western front 1914-19', having joined the society. I am not aware of his having been to other meetings, but on more than one occasion he told me that he enjoyed reading *Sheetlines*.

In his works that I have read, Alan drew heavily on his own experiences, so it is inevitable that maps feature frequently, with numerous references in his autobiography. However, the most explicit piece on maps in his life, 'A sense of place', is best sought in *The Geographical Magazine*,⁵ as it includes illustrations.

¹ *Life without armour*, London, 1995.

² The majority of which bear his signature in black ink, usually on the cover.

³ *Trench maps : a collectors' guide. Vol.1 British regular series 1:10,000 trench maps*, GSGS 3062, Lewes, 1986.

⁴ *Topography of Armageddon : a British trench map atlas of the Western Front 1914-1918*, Lewes, 1991.

⁵ A sense of place, *The Geographical Magazine*, 47 (1975), 685-689 . The same text, but lacking the coloured hand-drawn maps, forms Chapter 4 in *Mountains and caverns : selected essays*, London, 1975.

The young Sillitoe seems constantly to have been teaching himself something, French, the Greek alphabet, surveying and much more. 'The war began when I was eleven, and I bought the Army Manual of map reading and field sketching, a War Office publication which seemed at first to answer all my questions on the subject.' 'With a cheap and primitive compass I worried and pursued the mysteries of magnetic variation.' 'So in my spare time I applied myself to learning the art of air navigation...' 'I sent for a correspondence course in surveying...I studied for many months, and at last really got to grips with the proper science of surveying. In all seriousness, it seemed the only thing I was cut out for, to qualify so that I could bury myself in the mundane occupation of making maps.' In 1984, his novel *Down from the hill*, of a cycling tour based on a small road atlas was published. 'I also carried a three-mile-to-an-inch National Road Atlas...' 'My atlas wasn't good enough for getting me through towns because, in order to comply with the Control of Maps Order, street plans had been cut out of this edition.' 'At the village of Blatherdene, on page 132 [of the atlas]...'

Alan Sillitoe was the only person I know who was interested in the 1:1,000,000 International Map of the World. He was particularly fond of all areas east of Europe and would ask for specific sheets. About five years ago, he called in on his way to Nottingham (London to Nottingham via Kerry?) in order to go through a pile of 1:1,000,000 flat sheets. He rushed in, wearing a long leather coat over a black leather waistcoat. A very dapper and trim man. He had no list of his holdings nor of what he required, but very quickly sorted out what he needed and quoted several sheets that he would like if they ever came my way. And no sooner had he arrived than he was off. My final memory is of Alan walking briskly down our path waving a roll of maps as a goodbye.

Buying maps in 1945

In *Down from the hill*, set in 1945, the narrator goes into a shop in Stafford to try to buy a local map: 'All she could offer was the coloured sheet of the Ordnance Survey for one-and-sixpence. She apologised for it being paper flat instead of on cloth, but I was glad to have it, thinking you still needed police permission to buy this kind of map. You did in Nottingham, anyway, unless it was only black and white, though things might have altered now that the war in Europe was over.'

This doesn't seem to quite accord with the restrictions actually imposed by the regulations. According to Richard Oliver the broad thrust of the *Control of Maps Order 1940* (revoked in 1944) was (a) no map at larger than one-inch scale to be sold without a permit and (b) no alien to have any map at a much smaller scale.