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John Fraser

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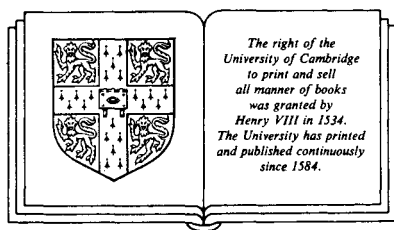
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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

To Michael Black

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

Hamlet, III, i, 86–8

Contents

Preface	page ix
Introduction	i
<i>I</i>	
Prospero's Book: <i>The Tempest</i> Revisited	11
Dust and Dreams and <i>The Great Gatsby</i>	31
In Defence of Culture: <i>Huckleberry Finn</i>	41
<i>Othello</i> and Honour	59
The Name of Action: Nelly Dean and <i>Wuthering Heights</i>	71
Crime and Forgiveness: <i>The Red Badge of Courage</i> in Time of War	81
Rereading Traven's <i>The Death Ship</i>	92
<i>II</i>	
A Dangerous Book?: <i>The Story of O</i>	115
Yvor Winters: the Perils of Mind	132
Mr Frye and Evaluation	152
Swift and the Decay of Letters	170
<i>III</i>	
Theories and Practices: the Hammonds' <i>The Village</i> <i>Labourer</i>	181
George Sturt's Apprenticeship	193
Atget and the City	206
Reflections on the Organic Community	224
Notes	243

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

These essays, which were assembled at the invitation of the publishers, were written between 1956 and 1973 and include most of my literary criticism. Some of them are virtually unchanged, in others I have done what I could to make the prose read more smoothly. However, I have not tried to bring any of them up to date or to rethink them with the wisdom, if that is what it is, of hindsight. For one thing, I still very largely agree with what I said at the time. And for another, when I wrote them I was at work on problems to which I did not have any neat answers, so that to attempt to redo, say, the discussion of *The Story of O* in the light of the subsequent sexual revolutions would be to sacrifice an important part of what that article is about, namely trying to find my bearings as a critic in what was then an uncharted region.

Putting the essays together has been a happy occasion for me, not only because some of them, such as the one on *Huckleberry Finn*, may now have a better chance at visibility, but also because of their relationship to my two previous books. *Violence in the Arts* (1974) and *America and the Patterns of Chivalry* (1982) had their beginnings in the essays, and the three books form a triptych. In all of them I was writing as someone who grew up in England but moved to America in the early fifties, and was trying to come to terms with conflicting 'English' and 'American' attitudes towards self-affirmation and social order. And the books complement each other in both substance and technique. In the essays I went deeper into the intricacies of individual works, some of them great ones, than I would do later, and what I learned by doing so emboldened me to move beyond the borders of literature. In one magical summer in the mid-sixties, passed in the French village described in the final essay, I wrote not only the essays on *The Tempest* and *Huckleberry Finn* but the one on Eugène Atget and also a very long essay that I subsequently expanded into *Violence in the Arts*. And after that book was done I went on, without at first realizing what I was getting myself into, to the large-scale cultural and historical explorations of

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

America and the Patterns of Chivalry, a book which is as much about the nature of sane peace as it is about the appeals of combat. I mention these things because I believe that the study and teaching of literature are important and that literary, social, and political concerns form a natural continuum. The essays are all self-sufficient discussions of their respective subjects, but there is a logic to their sequence and the book is more than a miscellany.

The provenance of the essays is as follows: 'Prospero's Book', *Critical Review* (1968); 'Dust and Dreams', *ELH* (1965); 'In Defence of Culture', *Oxford Review* (1967); 'Othello and Honour', *Critical Review* (1965); 'The Name of Action', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1965); 'Crime and Forgiveness', *Criticism* (1967); 'Rereading *The Death Ship*', *Southern Review* (1973); 'A Dangerous Book?', *Western Humanities Review* (1966); 'Yvor Winters', *Centennial Review* (1970); 'Mr Frye and Evaluation', *Cambridge Quarterly* (1967); 'Theories and Practices', *Review of English Literature* (1967); 'Atget and the City', *Cambridge Quarterly* (1968); 'Reflections on the Organic Community', *Human World* (1974). 'George Sturt's Apprenticeship' is a conflation of an article of that name in the *Review of English Literature* (1964) and 'Sturt and Class', *English Studies in Africa* (1967). The long Afternote on *The Turn of the Screw* was abstracted from 'The Turn of the Screw Again', *Midwest Quarterly* (1966). 'Swift and the Decay of Letters' (1956) has not been published before. I wish to thank the journals concerned for permission to reprint the material that appeared in their pages and for having published it in the first place.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the following: to Michael Black of the Cambridge University Press, without whom these books would not exist and who made excellent suggestions about what to put in this one; to my colleague John Baxter, who likewise read more of my prose than anyone should have to and gave valued advice and encouragement; to P. R. Marsh and Maureen Leach of the Cambridge University Press for their considerateness during the production process; and to my wife Carol, who for years has wanted me to get out a book of essays, and who is a presence in these pages. I am in the debt, too, of three institutions that allowed me freedom to pursue questions that interested me, the first two as a student, the third as a teacher – Balliol College,

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xi

Oxford, in the late forties, the English Department of the University of Minnesota in the fifties, and my own Department, which has put up with me for almost a quarter of a century.

John Fraser

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