

My old prof's an actor?

I have always been keen on woods, ever since I took my Forestry badge in the Scouts and for the past 40 years I have worked as a volunteer for the Woodland Trust. Two of these woods have turned out to have an interesting history. My discovery of this aspect of one of them took place just before I retired. Within Dolebury Warren Wood on the Mendips was an intriguing ruined building which turned out to be the country retreat of a clergyman and would-be playwright The Rev Dr Thomas Sedgwick Whalley who had a good sense to marry a wealthy Somerset widow. He was well connected: his father had been Regius Professor of Divinity and Master of Peterhouse, Cambridge and his grandfather was Chancellor of Wells cathedral. With this background and in the time before the Great Reform Act of 1832 he was able to collect lucrative livings and devote himself to his literary pursuits within the social gatherings of the City of Bath where he had a house in Royal Crescent. The many literary friends he acquired there included David Garrick, the London theatre manager and playwright, Mrs. Siddons, the leading actress of her day, and Hannah More. Thomas also became guardian of his talented and beautiful young niece, hence the title of my 2014 book "The Reverend Dr Thomas Sedgwick Whalley and the Queen of Bath".



The Rev Dr Thomas Sedgwick Whalley

Now Thomas' friend Hannah More was another remarkable lady who is now little known outside Somerset. As a girl she was allowed to sit in the back of the school for boys in Fishponds run by her well educated but impoverished father. There she acquired an excellent knowledge of English literature and the French and Latin languages at a very early age. (She was not allowed to study mathematics because it was felt this would overheat the female brain). Ten years later, as an eligible young lady now running her own prestigious school for young ladies in Bristol, she was proposed to by a wealthy local landowner who then continued to delay "naming the day". It transpired he was gay and was eventually persuaded by his male friends to break off the engagement but in compensation to pay Hannah a generous annuity. This allowed her to become a successful playwright, an energetic educationalist and religious reformer as well as a notable force in the antislavery movement.

When my book was published in 2014 it was hardly a bestseller, more vanity publishing, but I soon found myself giving frequent talks on Dr Whalley to local history groups (there are 60 in Bristol). In due course I ended up being able to wax lyrical on local Radio. Having done one of these talks on BBC-FM Bristol I discovered that the manager of this company also ran Redcliffe Films who were about to make a film on the life of Hannah More. What they did not seem to know was that the Rev. Thomas Sedgwick had been one of Hannah's closest and lifelong friends and when, in her old age, her servants started to steal from her, Thomas had made his Bristol house over to her. Then, with the help of another mutual friend, the banker and abolitionist John Scandrett Harford of Blaise, they whisked Hannah away to spend the final years of her life in great comfort among friends in Clifton.

Having narrated this part of Hannah's history I was asked if I would like to play the role of Thomas in the forthcoming film. Now my father had always advised me that when offered new challenges then, provided they were not illegal or immoral, I should accept since it was all good experience which I had no need to repeat if I didn't enjoy it. The filming took place in 2018 and a year's post-production followed. Since then, the film has been gradually achieving distinction in various film festivals around the world to the point where it is now going on general release having acquired a Certificate PG from the British Board of Film Classification. Now it may not appear in the Oscars but as Lonnie Donegan says in his song "My old man's a dustman" – when you get to my age it helps to pass the time!



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