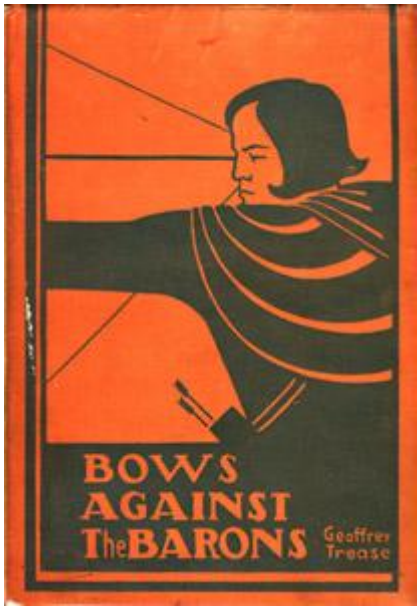
Geoffrey Trease and Colwall by Andy Ball

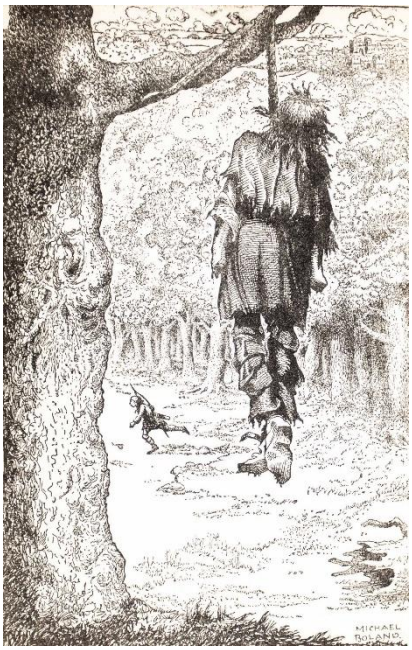
Amongst the many notable people who once lived in Colwall was the twentieth century author Robert Geoffrey Trease (1909 – 1998) known as Geoffrey Trease. He was an important and prolific writer, perhaps most notable for producing books which changed the way that historical fiction was written for young people.

Trease was born in Nottingham, the third youngest son of George Trease and his wife Florence Dale. George was a wine merchant in Nottingham and Florence was a doctor's daughter. As a child Geoffrey Trease won a scholarship to Nottingham High School where his literary talents were evident – he wrote, stories, poems and a three act play. After leaving school he went up to Oxford to study classics, but the teaching was too dull for him, and he left after just one year. He moved to London, with a determination to pursue a career as a writer. Once there he worked with disadvantaged children in the East End and joined a left-wing group called the 'Promethean Society'. This experience was to be in great contrast to his time spent studying at Oxford.[i]

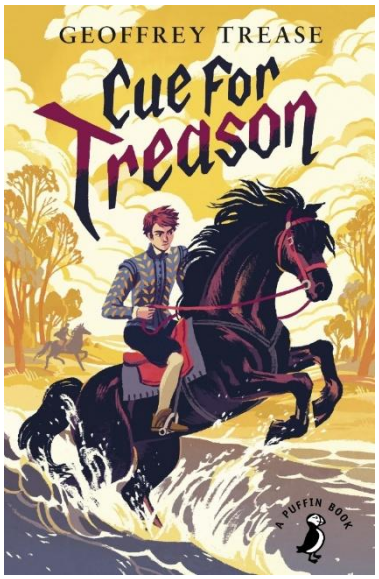


In the early 1930s he read an English translation of the dramatized version of the USSR's *Five Year Plan* which had been adapted for a youthful audience. This was to be the inspiration for his first commercial book - *Bows Against the Barons* - an interpretation of the traditional Robin Hood story. The 152-page book, first published in 1934, set the tone for a radical new style of children's fiction. This was characterized by attention to historical accuracy, gritty realism, strong male *and* female lead characters, use of everyday language, themes of equality and fairness, and the linking of historical settings with contemporary issues. Trease once described his childhood reading as '*a diet of classist and racist historical adventure'* and *Bows Against the Barons* certainly broke this mould. The book was left wing in tone with reference to 'workers' and 'comrades' and one of the illustrations, depicting the Nottingham riot, subliminally included peasants brandishing the hammer and the sickle.

Another illustration, of a corpse hanging from a tree, meant that the book gained some notoriety as overly protective parents took to tearing out the offending page before passing the novel on to their eager children.



In Britain the book was initially only a very modest success but in the USSR it was exceptionally well-received and soon sold over 100,000 copies. The following year Trease travelled there with his wife Marian (they were married in 1933) and stayed for five months living off the royalties, as he was unable to transfer the money to England.



His second book *Comrades for the Charter* also published in 1934 sold less well but, following the publication of several other children's books, he once again gained success with *Cue For Treason*. Published in 1940, and set in late 16th century Elizabethan England, this is probably his most definitive work.

During World War Two Trease spent time working as a teacher in Cumbria before being conscripted into the Army Education Corps and serving in England and India.[ii]

Trease was nothing if not prolific as a writer. In all he wrote over 110 books before ceasing commercial writing at the age of 88, following an illness. His work covered many genres.

His children's books included novels for both younger and older audiences. He wrote a handful of novels for adults and other adult nonfiction works such as *Walking In England* (1935). He also penned three plays including *After the Tempest* (1938).

He wrote three autobiographies – *A Whiff of Burnt Boats* (1971), and *Laughter at the Door* (1974); whilst *Farewell the Hills* (1998), was published privately following his death. [iii]

He was also very serious about what he did. He produced a seminal piece *Tales Out of School* in 1949 which was a wide-ranging survey of children's literature which concluded that the best books confirm and extend the child's own experience. A good book, he wrote '*uses language skilfully to entertain and represent reality, to stimulate the imagination or to educate the emotions'* [iv].

He also changed his views as time went on, distancing himself from some of his earliest works denouncing the propagandist tone and historical inaccuracies arguing that the writer '*should have the same sort of professional ethic as a teacher – whatever his personal beliefs, he mustn't use his position of professional advantage to press party politics on readers too immature to argue with him on fair terms'* [v].

Trease won some critical acclaim whilst writing and he won the New York Herald Tribune Book Award for the Children's Spring Festival 1966 for *This is Your Century*. George Orwell once complimented Trease on his writing for children describing him as '*that creature we have long been needing, a 'light' left-wing writer, rebellious but human, a sort of PG Wodehouse after a course of Marx*'[vi].

Regarding Trease's connections with Colwall it is fortunate that his third and final autobiography - *Farewell the Hills* - includes a frank and detailed account of his time living in the village. He moved to Colwall from Abingdon with his wife Marian on 7th April 1954.[vii] The couple had considered several other locations for what they intended was to be their forever home. They pondered upon alternative moves to Oxford, Cumberland or the South Devon coast before finally deciding upon the Malvern Hills area. The house that they finally bought in Colwall, The Croft, a property on the junction of Mathon Road and Old Church Road, was one that they both immediately fell in love with as soon as they did their first viewing. There was competition for The Croft at the time, and the couple drove straight back over the Malvern Hills to the agent's office to sign over a cheque for the deposit on the house.[viii]

The Croft was a semi-detached house that had been built just before the start of the First World War for two women friends who wished to live close to one another. Failing to find suitable properties simultaneously on the market they eventually bought a one-acre field and divided it into two. The field had at one time been the residence of a solitary cow that grazed there, and the dilapidated stone and timber cowshed was still present in the garden when the Treases moved in having by then been converted into a toolshed and garage. Indeed, it exists to this day fronting the Mathon Road, and is, according to Trease, likely to have originally been built in the 17th or 18th centuries.[ix]

The Croft was the easterly part of the pair of houses, the other half being Meadowcroft. The original occupant was a Miss Lamb who by repute was the friend '*with the money*', whilst her friend in Meadowcroft '*was the one with ideas'*. The pairing, in property terms, was a success as both houses were, and still are - stylish, well-proportioned and comfortable, with excellent views of the Herefordshire Beacon on the Malvern Hills. The Treases were delighted with their new home as Geoffrey recalled – '*Our new home was an ideal combination of convenience and character.'*[x]

The garden at The Croft proved to be a source of pleasure for both the Treases and is well described in *Farewell the Hills*. *'It was wonderful the variety that the half-acre contained. Beside its boundary hedges and stone walls it had internal hedges, an arbour, and trimmed yews. There was a lawn just big enough for croquet and, in due course, for the marquee at Jocelyn's wedding reception – and there were four smaller irregular expanses of grass. There was a paved area with a sundial, a sunken walk, a little stretch of balustraded terrace, below which Marian, eventually made a rose garden. In the first weeks the chief 'glory' (I jotted in the notebook) was 'the apple blossom - especially on the espaliers – the pear tree by the sundial, the spray of cold white cherry-blossom under the East window.' We had lots of apple trees and two of them, we found later, would bear us Christmas Mistletoe. The front of the house was*

thickly mantled with pyracantha, called firethorn locally, with whose white flowers and scarlet berries the climbing roses had to compete in the race to reach our bedroom window. Fresh attractions appeared with every month that went by.' The garden was principally Marian's domain, but Geoffrey helped with some of the more mundane practical tasks such as lawn mowing, hedge cutting and fruit tree pruning. They also employed the help of a part-time gardener. Initially this was a diminutive, hardworking and competent Shropshire woman gardener called Louie, but subsequently '*an ancient cowman of limited horticultural skill'*[xi].

In a chapter in *Farewell the Hills* entitled *Colwall - friends and neighbours* Trease paints a vivid picture of life in the village in the mid-1950s. When the Treases moved to Colwall they knew no-one in the village and were wary of its potentially limited social possibilities. Their fears were unfounded and slowly they gained the friendship of their neighbours – '*Within the year, I reckoned, we had been invited to almost every house of the first half-dozen along each of the three roads branching from our corner site*.' [xii]

Opposite The Croft in the timber framed former farmhouse was Mrs Barribal, an artist's widow who ran a popular boarding house for cats. The Treases affectionately knew her as '*Mrs Tiggywinkle'* as '*she was a witch with cats*.' The other side of Mathon Road, The Gables, was then occupied by two old ladies with their nurse companion for the benefit of the younger sister who was subject to mental confusion.[xiii]

Down the road, in a converted lodge, was Miss Woodhams whom the Treases privately called '*Miss Diddums*' due to her astringent character. She had been a music teacher at the Downs school and had been one of the witnesses to W.H. Auden's marriage to Erika Mann at Ledbury registry office during the 1930s. [xiv]

The Treases also knew Stephen Ballard, the fruit grower and his wife Eve who lived nearby. Eve was an invalid who had been an advertising copyrighter and became a close friend of Geoffrey and Marian.[xv]

Amongst the other notable people that the Treases socialised with in the Malverns were the theatre director Sir Barry Jackson and the historian Allardyce Nicoll both of whom had homes on the Hills. They were associates of the nationally renowned artist Dame Laura Knight who lived and painted locally but there is no mention of her in *Farewell the Hills*. Geoffrey Trease and his daughter Jocelyn both had their portraits painted by the well-respected Malvern-based artist Victor Hume Moody. [xvi]

Geoffrey Trease recalls how he was surprised at how Colwall residents often had a wealth of life experiences. He gives the example of a Mrs Milic, a genteel old lady of whom it might be assumed nothing extraordinary had ever happened. In fact, it turned out that in 1914 she had volunteered as a nurse overseas and had worked in a Scottish women's Red Cross contingent in what was then Serbia. In 1915 she had endured the hazardous retreat by the Serbs from the Germans over the mountains to Albania. She married a Serbian General, living in Belgrade between the wars, before being imprisoned in a Nazi prison during World War Two. She had moved to Colwall as a widow and showed Geoffrey Trease her Serbian medals conferred to her for gallantry

under fire from World War One. Her influence upon Geoffrey Trease was profound and he humbly admitted how '*She taught me not to judge by appearances*.' [xvii]

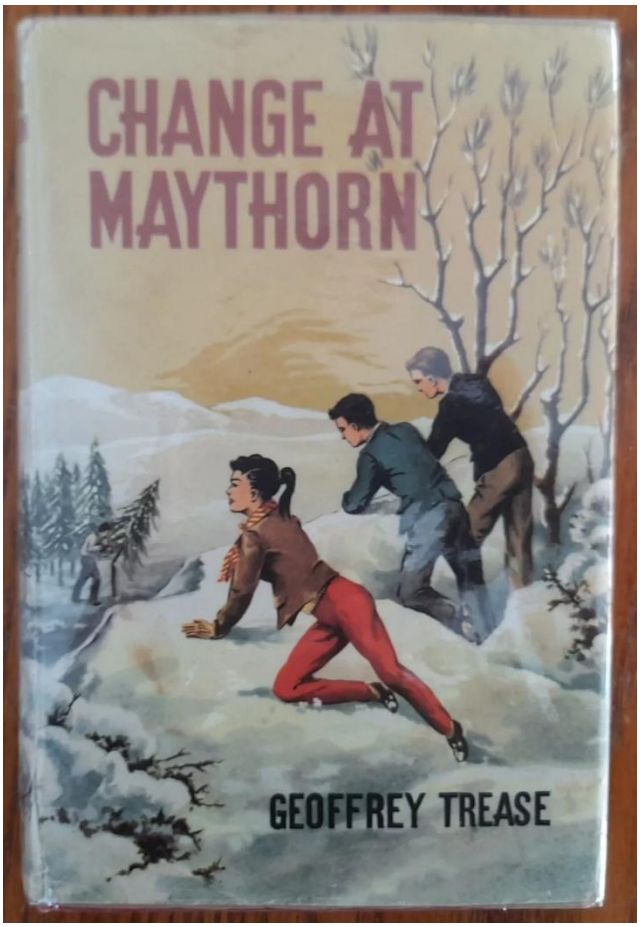
Trease is candid in his autobiography, both of those people in Colwall that he liked and those whom he did not. Whilst in Colwall the Treases joined the Malvern Writers Circle and it was in association with that organisation that Geoffrey Trease's dislike for one Colwall resident is clearly signalled in *Farewell the Hills*. '*There was a lady (an uncomfortably close neighbour of ours in Colwall) with a decidedly angular personality and two claims to local fame.*' Trease was enough of a gentleman not to name the subject of his irk by name, merely calling her '*Mrs S*.' In his autobiography he described how this woman had '*compiled a grossly inaccurate village history*' and was an impromptu weather prophet. From the timing and content of the account it is possible to conclude that he was referring to Winifred Clay Stringer a woman with whom Trease repeatedly crossed swords. [xviii]

Farewell the Hills contains good descriptions of daily life in Colwall in the mid-twentieth century. Colwall was, even then, a sizable commuter and retirement village of some two thousand inhabitants. The area around Colwall Stone at that time still contained what Trease described as '*our miniature shopping centre, by the station'.* Facilities included the Post Office, a pharmacy, two banks and a pair of competing butchers. The railway station at Colwall had been a big part of the attraction of Colwall to the Treases. Geoffrey Trease did not drive and Marian soon abandoned her attempts to drive locally citing the steep, narrow and winding roads and the prevalence of loose sheep! [xix]

Colwall provided excellent railway links to other parts of the country with through trains to Worcester, Oxford, Paddington and Birmingham, with westward departures to Hereford and Cardiff. By changing trains at Hereford and then again at Bristol or Crewe there was then access to the Southwest or the North of England, whilst a single change at Birmingham took the traveller straight through to the Highlands.

Both Geoffrey and Marian loved walking on the Malvern Hills, often taking friends and visitors up to the top of the ridge or to Herefordshire Beacon with panoramic views across Worcestershire and Herefordshire. Geoffrey took inspiration from previous literary connections including the writer Elizabeth Barrett Browning's associations with nearby Hope End; Ledbury based John Masefield's local poems and the *Vision of Piers Plowman* allegedly composed by a former Colwall resident. As Trease recalled – '*Even without that parochial claim, this seemed an appropriate country for a writer*.' [xx]

Indeed, his time at Colwall proved to be a productive one and Geoffrey Trease often spent seven days a week writing from the upstairs study at The Croft. In 1956 he completed his five book Lake District saga with the publication of *The Gates of Bannerdale*. [xxi]

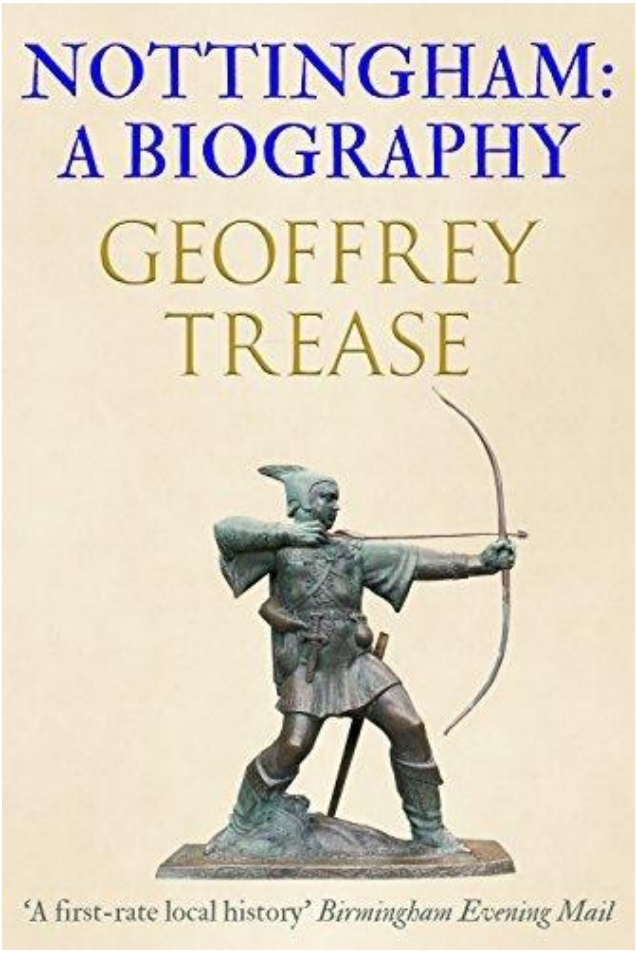


In subsequent books *The Maythorn Story* and *Change at Maythorn*, published in 1960 and 1962 respectively, he used his new setting in Colwall as inspiration. '*Little Maythorn was Colwall and my leading boy was a townee, plunged into this idyllic world by his father's posting as a stationmaster to a tiny station at the mouth of a tunnel through the hills. The girl's house was literally closer to home. It was modelled on the one we lived in ourselves, and the illustrator, Robert Hodgson, drew it faithfully. These stories were a great song of praise to our environment. The great copper beech in the garden, the Iron Age Camp on the skyline, the larchwood mantling the slopes, the elegant little town behind the hills – I worked them all in.*' [xxii]

In the first five years after moving to Colwall Trease wrote nine books and reviewed other people's writings. He also travelled extensively taking advantage of Colwall's excellent train links. In the same five-year period he also made fifty-one trips to give lectures, often having several lectures per trip. [xxiii]

Sometimes Trease's young audiences visited him at The Croft in Colwall. Over a twenty-year period, Diana Jaggard brought a group of young pupils from a private establishment, the Croft School in Stratford, to see the Treases. This was part of the school's Young Explorers Club in which 9-year-old girls and boys would visit the Malverns to walk the Hills and stay overnight in the local youth hostel. Geoffrey charmingly describes their visits to his house in *Farewell the Hills*. *'The children would come laughing and chattering up the drive. At a word they would stack their rucksacks outside the porch and, mindful of Mrs Trease's carpets, take off their muddy footgear before tiptoeing into the hall. Mrs Jaggard always bought two or three fathers on these expeditions, to share the boys' sleeping accommodation at the hostel. These smiling, burley men would follow their sons' example and remove their shoes as meekly as if they were entering a mosque. We were never allowed to offer more hospitality than a glass of lemonade. Crowded into our living-room or clustered on the lawn, they would*

all listen to a chapter from the book I was then writing – it seemed to thrill the children to feel that they would be the first in the world to hear part of this story yet unborn. Then questions and answers and eventually polite thank-yous before they resumed rucksacks and went off backward smiles and waves.' [xxiv]



Later in the 1970s, whilst living in Colwall, Trease wrote several of his factual adult non-fiction books including *Nottingham: A Biography* (1970), *London: A Concise History* (1975), and *D. H. Lawrence, The Phoenix and the Flame Biography* (1973).

Geoffrey Trease summarised his contentment with his life in Colwall in the lee of the Malvern Hills. '*How good it was, after campaigns and controversies, to settle back into my world of hills and horizons! No risk of boredom, though. I never found either Colwall or Malvern boring. There were things going on, little things, true, but human and lively. There were neighbours and visitors, old friends and interesting strangers from afar. There were meetings of the Writers Circle, plays on tour, symphony concerts in the Winter Gardens.'* [xxv]

As time went on, however, Marian's health became an increasing and constant cause for concern following a fall in her bedroom at The Croft. She was in her eightieth year. It became obvious that the practicalities of remaining at The Croft were becoming more difficult. The Trease's daughter, Jocelyn, had recently remarried and was living in Bath so a move there to be nearer to her and her family seemed the obvious solution. Jocelyn and her husband sourced a bungalow for sale immediately adjacent to their own house and the purchase was organised. The Treases had no problem finding a buyer for The Croft and it sold to the daughter of a friend and neighbour who was recently divorced. When they moved to Bath Geoffrey and Marian had been at The Croft for thirty-two years. [xxvi]

Geoffrey and Marian spent their final years in Bath, coincidentally a city that they had once both lived in briefly before. Marian's health issues were identified as being partly down to Parkinsons disease and eventually she went into a small, private nursing home before dying in her sleep in 1989. Shortly after Marian's death Jocelyn and Geoffrey took

her ashes up to the Malvern Hills close to the café - The Kettle Sings - and scattered them there. [xxvii]

Geoffrey summed up his time with Marian. '*Our marriage had ended just short of its fifty-sixth anniversary, which was also my eightieth birthday. It had been the happiest, most harmonious, relationship, though being human not without its stresses in the earlier years. In my first literary struggles and disappointments - until war came my earnings barely kept us above the poverty line – Marian was uncomplaining and, as always later, entirely, supportive. The war brought six years of general separation. I could only join her, and my daughter, in their temporary home with my mother in Nottingham when I had my school holidays from my teaching post in Cumberland – and then on my much briefer army leaves. So those six years were predominantly separate, the last one (when I was in India) completely so. But we came together again at last, back in our little house in Abingdon, matured by our experiences. Marian's quiet, self-effacing manner was deceptive. She was a strong, highly-principled character, with sincere opinions. We could sometimes disagree but always good-humouredly. We never had what anybody would have called a quarrel.*' [xxviii]

Following Marian's death Geoffrey stoically carried on, continuing to write until shortly before his death when illness forced him to stop. His last four books all published in 1997 were *Danger in the Wings; Mission to Marathon; Elizabeth, Princess in Peril* and *Cloak for a Spy*. A prolific writer to the end he died on 27th January 1998 aged eighty-eight.

The writer Ann Thwaite wrote a charming obituary for Trease in The Independent newspaper in January 1998. In it she described his compulsion to write and the need to publicise what he had done. She describes how he said to her he "*could not afford to miss a guinea*" - or a chance to make his books known - "*hand on heart, I have never written anything with any calculated incentive in cash terms. And I know, in my old age, that my writing is a vocation, for - my tastes and responsibilities being very modest - I don't need the money. I could stop tonight, but as you know I don't. Anything but*."[xxix]

Adrian and Carole Mealing, the current owners of The Croft, had some contact with both Geoffrey and Jocelyn after they moved into the house 1991. Adrian spoke on the phone with Geoffrey who was delighted that The Croft was so enjoyed by its new owners, whilst Jocelyn wrote to the Mealings in 1995.[xxx]

How to summarise Trease? He appears to have been a sociable, decent, principled, thorough, capable, modest, humanitarian and hard-working man. Both he and Marian lived very full lives and loved their time at The Croft. In *Farewell the Hills* Geoffrey paints a wonderfully evocative picture of a very comfortable and pleasant time in Colwall during the 1950s through to the 1980s. They were evidently very sad to move on, no doubt having both contributed much to local life during their time in the village.

[i] Wikipedia (2025) Geoffrey Trease. Available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoffrey_Trease (Accessed 07 July 2025)

[ii] Abingdon Area Archaeology and History Society (2016) *Geoffrey Trease Biography*. Available at https://www.abingdon.gov.uk/abingdon_people/geoffrey-trease (Accessed 09 July 2025)

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[iv] Walker, J (2015) *UNESCO City of Culture: Geoffrey Trease*. Available at https://leftlion.co.uk/features/2015/03/unesco-city-of-literature-geoffrey-trease/ (Accessed 09 July 2025).

[v] Walker, J (2015) *UNESCO City of Culture: Geoffrey Trease.* Available at https://leftlion.co.uk/features/2015/03/unesco-city-of-literature-geoffrey-trease/ (Accessed 09 July 2025).

[vi] Walker, J (2015) *UNESCO City of Culture: Geoffrey Trease*. Available at https://leftlion.co.uk/features/2015/03/unesco-city-of-literature-geoffrey-trease/ (Accessed 09 July 2025).

[vii] Trease, G (1998) Farewell the Hills. Bath: GT Publications

[viii] Trease, G (1998) Farewell the Hills. Bath: GT Publications

[ix] Trease, G (1998) Farewell the Hills. Bath: GT Publications

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[xi] Trease, G (1998) Farewell the Hills. Bath: GT Publications

[xii] Trease, G (1998) Farewell the Hills. Bath: GT Publications

[xiii] Trease, G (1998) Farewell the Hills. Bath: GT Publications

[xiv] Trease, G (1998) Farewell the Hills. Bath: GT Publications

[xv] Trease, G (1998) Farewell the Hills. Bath: GT Publications

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[xxix] Thwaite, A (1998) 'Obituary: Geoffrey Trease' *The Independent* Friday 30th January 1998. Available at https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/obituary-geoffrey-trease-1141717.html (Accessed 22 July 2025)

[xxx] Mealing, A. (2025) Email to Andy Ball,13th February.