

# Alan Sillitoe

**When his RAF career was cut short by TB he settled in Mallorca on a military pension. There Robert Graves advised him to write about his background. His first novel, drawing on his experiences as a Nottingham factory worker, was a groundbreaking success. Now 76, he continues to produce novels that reflect his uncompromising independence. James Campbell reports**

# Conflict zones

**F**rom 9.30 in the morning until 11 at night, Alan Sillitoe sits at the rectangular oak table in his study, and works. His new novel, *A Man of His Time*, is published this month, but Sillitoe's attention is fixed on the 750 pages of his next book, already in its fourth draft, with corrections in ink on every typewritten sheet. For relaxation, he switches on his shortwave radio and listens to Morse code, in which he is proficient, having trained as a wireless operator in the RAF at the end of the second world war. A page of French text in his handwriting lies next to the stack of manuscript, deciphered from the ministry of telecommunications in Paris. The subject, surprisingly, is the poet Paul Valéry. "It's therapy", Sillitoe says of his hobby. "I like to eavesdrop, though you're meant to shred everything you take down. Once Morse has been implanted in your brain at the age of 16 or 17, it never leaves you." On his own Morse key he plays with deep concentration, tapping out the date and day of the week, the name of his companion, a line of poetry — anything that helps to keep the transmitting wrist agile. In France, he says, the Morse operator is known as *le pianiste*.

Sillitoe is small and self-contained, with a manner that can seem flinty, until he engages in conversation, which acts like a lubricant. With his wife of 45 years, the poet Ruth Fainlight, he lives on the western fringe of Notting Hill. They have a son, David, who works as a photographer at the Guardian, and a daughter, Susan, who teaches journalism. Sillitoe draws on a

pipe more or less constantly, and is doggedly single-minded in his dedication to writing. "He once said to me that he felt tied to his desk", says the poet Christopher Logue, who has known Sillitoe for many years. "He didn't sound unhappy about it. He was saying, 'This is my lot.'"

Sillitoe is the author of some 50 books, including poetry, plays and stories for children, as well as 25 novels. His views on politics and society reflect a military mind's dislike of compromise and pay no heed to fashionable nostrums. Words like "intellectual", from his lips, are not expected to flatter. An afternoon break from work is likely to take him across Holland Park to Kensington, to consult a map in the Royal Geographical Society. "He's cool-headed and clever", says Logue. "He has this stern side, but he's a good person to be with if facing a difficult task." Except when travelling abroad, or attending to his family, Sillitoe sticks to his staunch routine seven days a week. "Oh yes", he says. "There's no sabbath for me."

Before settling in London, the Sillitoes lived in Mallorca for six years, and before that in the south of France. Later, there were spells in Tangier, in the surprising company of Tennessee Williams and Jane and Paul Bowles. The Sillitoes' London home gives the immediate impression of a New York apartment, with doors opening off both sides of a long narrow corridor. Yet in the mind of the reading public, Sillitoe is inescapably tied to Nottingham, the town where he grew up and which has provided the setting of much of his work,

Portrait by  
Eamonn McCabe

including his first and best-known novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, and the book of short stories that followed, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*.

"I think half my books are set in Nottingham, and the other half are set anywhere in the world," Sillitoe says. He disowns any special affiliation with ancestral spirits of the Midlands, such as DH Lawrence and Arnold Bennett. "I'm a great admirer of Bennett, but then again I admire Henry James and Conrad and Dickens and the rest, so they are all my ancestors. You don't only have ancestors from the next street or the next field." The Scottish writer Allan Massie, who has followed Sillitoe's career from the beginning, is surprised that he resists regional identification. "Perhaps he thinks it's patronising. I don't. I think it's one of his strong points that he writes about a distinct and recognisable society. In that respect, he is a novelist in the Bennett tradition and has many of Bennett's good qualities." Massie says Sillitoe "is not the kind of novelist who is terribly interested in technique, in doing things that are new or surprising. His greatest strength is in representing a version of the real world to the reader, with characters who eat and sleep and work. A lot of novelists can't imagine their characters working." Melvyn Bragg, who has set much of his own fiction in his native Cumbria, is sympathetic to Sillitoe's position. "All authors are right to reject labels, and given the history of 'regional' and 'working-class' in this country, these are to be avoided more than most." Yet he is, Bragg feels, "a writer who has tried to tell the truth about **page 22** ▶

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◀ page 20 a section of society that was, until he came along, largely ignored”.

Sillitoe was born on the outskirts of Nottingham in 1928, “one more mouth to feed”, as he puts it. During his childhood, he had to witness his father, Christopher, hitting his mother, and in his autobiography *Life Without Armour* (1995), Sillitoe recalled her “bending over the bucket so that blood from her cut head would not run on to the carpet”. He experienced “twinges of despair at her having met him and given me birth”. Christopher Sillitoe never learned to read and write, and suffered long periods of unemployment. As a child, Alan was sent to a “poor boys’ camp” in the summer. His mother, Sabina, occasionally supplemented the family income by selling the only thing she had: herself. Although his father’s vocabulary was limited, Sillitoe wrote, “he certainly knew the word *prostitute*. So did we, for it was bellowed many times.” At 14, Sillitoe left school and started work next to other family members in the local Raleigh bicycle factory. Cycling remained a pleasure well into adulthood, with trips taken through France, and bicycles and casual sex recur in his novels as ways of escaping into a pastoral world, out from beneath the blanket drudgery.

The experience on the Raleigh shop floor and in other factories gave life to *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, in which the priapic, rascally hero Arthur Seaton draws a decent wage by excelling at “piece work”, for which the worker is paid according to productivity. It was Sillitoe’s seventh or eighth attempt at a novel. “The others were never published, thank God, but I knew this one was different. It wasn’t naive. It wasn’t full of purple passages. It wasn’t derivative. I used to read books aloud to Ruth, and came to realise that good English is clear English, and, from that point on, everything had to be filtered through draft after draft. The first novel that came through under that system was *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.” Several of his unpublished short stories were ploughed into the narrative, “to enrich the texture, sometimes getting cut down from a few pages to just a paragraph”.

“There is a freshness about the novel,” Massie says. “When I read it, it immediately felt authentic. It felt new. It’s possible that he’s come to see it as a millstone round his neck, being the one people always mention, though he has in fact written better work since then, which is less well known.” *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* came out in 1958 and was made into a successful film the following year, with Albert Finney cast in the lead role (Sillitoe says he found it difficult at first to imagine Finney as Arthur). Rachel Roberts played Brenda, the pretty and promiscuous wife of Arthur’s work-mate. On publication, Sillitoe was greeted as the voice of a restless working class, ready at

last to graduate from postwar austerity, a younger, grittier cousin of the Angry Young Men. Most critics were determined to greet Arthur as a rebel without a cause, whereas his creator saw him as a typical card from the back-to-backs, whose main grudges were against no-nonsense publicans and possessive husbands. Reviews of this book, and of *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, published a year later, were printed under headlines such as “The Worker as a Young Tough” and “Voices from Downtroddendom”. The very sound of a regional accent in English fiction was unusual in the 1950s (it was, in fact, generally welcomed), and novels in which the working class were seen from the inside were rarer still. Sillitoe was credited by the English critic Anthony West, writing in the *New Yorker*, as having produced a novel that “breaks new ground”. In doing so, West argued, the newcomer had already “assured himself a place in the history of the English novel”.

*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* preceded by two years the unsuccessful prosecution of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, on charges of obscenity, which raised the curtain on the permissive society, and Sillitoe’s novel still has a surprisingly racy feel today. The word “love” is charmingly used as a euphemism for any sexual encounter, and Arthur and Brenda, and later Brenda’s sister, take every opportunity to have their “bit of love”, usually under a friendly bush. The carnival is interrupted when Brenda falls pregnant. A gruesome procedure of self-induced abortion, graphically described, puts Arthur off his ale, though only for a night or two.

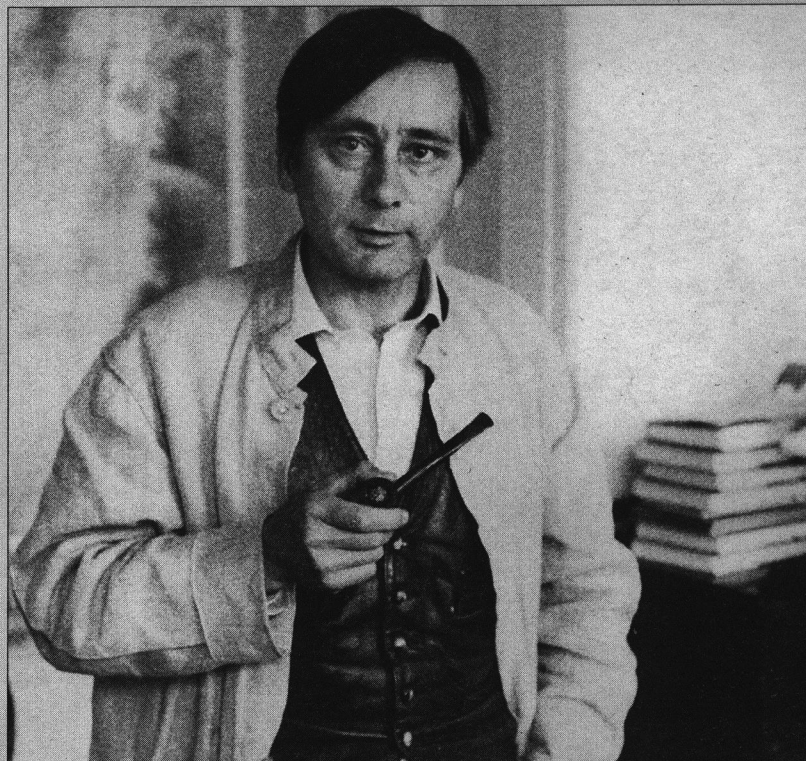
“When the film came out, everyone went to see it and the newspapers said it was atrocious and filthy and all the rest,” says Sillitoe. “They couldn’t have done me a better favour. It didn’t occur to me that the sex in the story was an issue — not one jot of feeling did I have about that. It just seemed normal. This was the way it was, and that was the way I was telling it.” The film censor demanded that the gin-and-hot-bath abortion, which does the trick in the novel, be depicted as unsuccessful on screen. The novel and film together influenced the next generation of reluctant regionalists. *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* has a small role in Melvyn Bragg’s latest novel, *Crossing the Lines* (2003), in which the hero reads the book at Oxford, then passes it to his father back in Wigton. Bragg says he didn’t plan the allusion in advance, but he sees it as “an unconscious way to pay tribute to someone who had gone before”. In the early 60s,

## ‘I’m against New Labour. They’re anti-drinking, anti-smoking. But I’m with them on Iraq’

Bragg “felt reinforced by the presence of Alan Sillitoe”.

The tone of *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* was more strident, more “anti-establishment” than that of Sillitoe’s debut. At one stage, Smith, the athletic borstal boy who deliberately loses a championship race in order to spite his guardians, proclaims his desire to “stick them up against a wall and let them have it”. By “them” he means “all the cops, governors, posh whores, penpushers, army officers, Members of Parliament”. Sillitoe

## Life at a glance



At the University of Puerto Rico, June 1974

### Alan Sillitoe

**Born:** March 4, 1928.

**Educated:** Various schools in Nottingham.

**Career:** 1942 Raleigh bicycle factory;

'46-'49 RAF wireless operator,

'58- professional writer.

**Married:** 1959, Ruth Fainlight (one son, one daughter).

**Some novels:** 1958 *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*;

'61 *Key to the Door*;

'72 *Raw Material*;

'74 *The Flame of Life*;

'79 *The Storyteller*;

'82 *Her Victory*;

'84 *Down from the Hill*;

'85 *Life Goes On*;

'89 *The Open Door*;

'90 *Last Loves*;

'91 *Leonard’s War*;

'99 *The German Numbers Woman*;

2001 *Birthday*.

**Some poetry:** 1960 *The Rats*;

'79 *Snow on the North Side of Lucifer*.

**Some others:** 1969 *All Citizens Are Soldiers*

(play, with Ruth Fainlight);

'94 *Life Without Armour* (autobiography);

2003 *A Flight of Arrows* (essays).

PHOTOGRAPH (ABOVE)  
BERNIE LOCKWOOD



RAF wireless operator, 1947

says now that the story, a sort of *Catcher in The Rye* with criminal convictions, “had all the influences of my life before the age of 30 coming out from the subconscious. Because even though it’s about a young man in borstal, you could say it was about a writer and his attitude to pressure from the media and society. You always have this urge to say, I don’t want your blandishments. I don’t want all your possible rewards. That must have been in my mind.”

He shows impatience with the Angry Young Man connection. “When all that stuff was taking place, I was sitting under an orange tree in Mallorca, so I can’t really say I had anything to do with it. To me, it just didn’t mean anything.” According to Harry Ritchie, author of *Success Stories* (1988), which explored the connection between literature and the media in the 1950s, “The Angry Young Man thing was a newspaper fabrication, specifically of 1956 and 57. It was effectively all over by the time Sillitoe came along, so he wasn’t really labelled as such — a bit curiously since he or at least Arthur Seaton really was an angry young man, of an anarchist bent.” Ritchie feels that *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is Sillitoe’s best work. “Unlike some of his later books, which often tend to meander about, it has a proper structure and a terrific leading role and voice. He does

seem to have had a career pattern like a pop star than a writer, who peaked immediately.”

Sillitoe claims to have been acquainted with writers such as K. E. Llewellyn Jones and John Wain. “I bumped them at parties now and then, and we were always quite friendly to each other, but I can’t say I knew them. I was not interested in their works than in Massie observes that, “in the later a lot of his characters having started working class become middle class. To that extent, he represents what I would call middle England.” Another feature to strike Massie is that Sillitoe’s characters “don’t have the guilt about leaving middle class that you find with Scottish novelists, for example”. Sillitoe himself declares: “I have no allegiance to the working class. I fundamentally believe that a novelist is obliged to write about any person in any economic status. You call Iris Murdoch a middle-class novelist? No. I have an emotional allegiance to my family, that’s about it.”

As if to stress his independence from all groups, Sillitoe set his second novel, *The General* (1960), in an unspecified setting reminiscent of Eastern Europe during war. The general of the title is in charge of the “Gorshek” army, which storms a city and takes prisoner the member of a symphony orchestra. He must



Revisiting the Malaysian jungle, 1988

whether to obey orders from afar and have them shot, or submit to the civilising influence of the music they play at his command. *The General* is a thriller that still exerts a certain power, but as a follow-up to the long-distance runner Smith's outburst against "them", it puzzled some readers and critics. There is not a class rebel in sight in the war zone, which Sillitoe now admits is the Ural mountains. One review was headlined "Go Back to Nottingham, Mr Sillitoe".

If he is determined to disown class as a defining theme, he is happy to admit to a preoccupation with war. Battle strategy has fascinated him since his teens. In his long poem "The Rats" (Sillitoe's *Collected Poems* was published in 1993), he wrote, "My mind is a war mind". As soon as he was old enough, he joined the Air Training Corps, but by the time he enlisted in the air force the war had just a few weeks to run. "I wanted to be a bomber navigator. I couldn't wait to get in. I passed all the exams and then when I enlisted I passed the air crew selection board and I thought, I'm on my way. Like a fool, perhaps, but that was the atmosphere. In any case, it was exactly what I wanted to do." He fully intended to make a career in the military, and began by training as a wireless operator. "I would have joined the Royal Canadian Air Force and got twice the pay of the RAF. We were at a premium." His plans

were altered, however, when he returned from Malaya and discovered he had tuberculosis. "I didn't get it from sleeping in the jungle, which I had done. I probably got it from somebody coughing in my face on a bus or something."

With a military pension, Sillitoe was able to leave England and live on the continent, where he began to write in earnest. He and Ruth, whom he had met in 1950, went to Mallorca for a few weeks and ended up staying several years. They became friendly with Robert Graves, who emerged as an unlikely father-figure to Arthur Seaton. Graves's advice to the industrious, unsuccessful Sillitoe was well-worn but sound: "Why don't you write about Nottingham, which is the place you know best?"

Graves had been a soldier in the first world war, surviving the battle of the Somme only by a miracle, and Sillitoe admired that side of him as much as any other. War is a subject he feels obliged to deal with, "because that was the voice of the 20th century, the voice of Mars, god of war". Several of Sillitoe's novels have a military theme, including *Leonard's War*, *The Lost Flying Boat*, *The Widower's Son*. In *Key to the Door*, his third novel, he introduced the character of Brian Seaton, Arthur's brother, sending him out to serve in the Far East, as the author himself had done. The novel is important in Sillitoe's

output, establishing the Seaton family and their Nottingham background as points of connection through different novels. "I've always had the *comédie humaine* of Balzac in mind," he says. "I will eventually delineate the dozen or so Nottingham novels in their order and say: This is a *comédie humaine* set in Nottingham. It's a literary ambition, that."

Sillitoe surprised some by coming out wholeheartedly in favour of the American and British invasion of Iraq, just as his pro-Zionist views were out of step with the feelings of many liberals in the 1970s. In a letter to the Times in October 1973, he argued for the continued occupation of Sinai and the Golan Heights as "the only guarantee of Israel's safety", a view he continues to hold. "Perhaps I flatter myself by saying that I seem to have a longer historical perspective than most people. I have recognised that the third world war began in 1973, with the Arabs using oil as a weapon against the West. That's when it really started. From now

## 'There must have been a point when I had to choose between living and writing. I chose writing'

on, it's a question of occasional small conflicts. The mission to get rid of Saddam Hussein, which was a good idea, was one. Islamic fundamentalism, which is pernicious, has to be counted as a factor in this." He believes Iraq will eventually be stabilised and left to its own devices. "It'll take five years, but it will happen."

When the protest march against the probable invasion of Iraq congregated in central London, Sillitoe was appalled to see that so many anti-war campaigners also carried 'Freedom for Palestine' placards. "It had nothing to do with the conflict," he says. "Every single Muslim from England, you see, came down into Hyde Park and they were all holding up these 'Free Palestine' notices. And all these" — there is a distinct sardonic emphasis here — "English intellectuals who marched with them . . . I think they're lunatics. They're just cutting their own throats. Because if the influence of all the Muslims in England does take off, it will be a sad day. It didn't help when you saw the Rushdie affair, when people were burning books in Bradford. Roll out the Gatling guns, I thought."

He has never belonged to a political party, but has voted Labour all his life. "And I'll probably do so again, even though I'm against New Labour. They're anti-smoking, anti-drinking, anti-driving, and if you have a small place in the country they want to double-tax you. On the other hand, I'm absolutely with them concerning the war in Iraq."

Sillitoe's wilful independence extends to his writing practices and his dealings with publishers. "You do not write what society or editors expect," he declared in *Life Without Armour*. Editorial interventions have been resisted, to the point of scooping up his manuscript and making for the door. Even a sympathetic reader is bound to wonder at such obstinacy, however. The above statement from his autobiography is followed, on the same page, by a thicket of impenetrable prose which a sensitive editor could have untangled: "Having been lifted by Fate out of the zone of popular culture for

most of the 50s could be com situation in which you didn't t ten to an adversary's point of care about not being able to", e

Sillitoe's new novel, *A Man of His Time*, extends the Nottingham *humaine* and, he says, most concludes it. The book employs device, setting characters from under their own names, in a fitting. Sillitoe's mother, Sabina, a young girl, as is her "wayw Edith and assorted children. above them is the tyrannical Ernest Burton, Sabina's father smith, who last featured in *Sill Raw Material* (1972). The *a Man of His Time* moves from to the present day. There is effect at the end when Arthur Seaton, now collecting their turn up and interact with depicted under their real n picture of Ernest Burton, a bu department of his life, incl complicated love life, is dr conversations Sillitoe had abo Sabina. "There is a lot of imagin done on him, so I shall never close it is to reality until I meet and he tells me about it, or c Asked if Arthur and Brian are real people, Sillitoe hesitates th little bit. Yes, rather more than ers. They won't mind if they re

He frequently returns to N to visit his two surviving brothe ters have died). "We're all very we just go into a pub and talk, *Birthday* (2001), the previou instalment of the *comédie*, I such scenes. To Massie, *Birth* sequel to *Saturday Night an Morning*, is the more interes "He was trying something different, showing character changed over the years, yet much the same. Families tha bonds, at the same time as growing apart. It's a difficult t Sequels are seldom better tha nal, but this one is." Reviewin that came before that, *Th Numbers Woman* (1999), Mas the Scotsman that Sillitoe's w the fashionable novels of the generation . . . look flimsy". Bra the way Sillitoe has "endured, by changes in literary fashion

Sillitoe's work-in-progress to round off yet another seq that began in 1970 with *A Start* continued in 1985 with *Life G* concluding volume in the trilc *Moggerhanger*. At the close of *out Armour*, he made a declaration that he had no possible to "work and live", a decision to commit himself ex writing had been "a mistak my life was concerned". Aske statement now, in the bunke spends the larger part of ea explains it as "a way of emph fact of dedication, of seeing through your eyes with a viev about it. There must have bee my life when I decided I had between living and writing, a writing. Of course, that doesn aren't attached to life throug possible tragedies, and so o have to know in which dire spirit wants to go, and neve of that."

*A Man of His Time* is published by Flaming price £17.99. To order a copy for £15.9 Guardian book service on 0870 066 79