



Leslie Thomas in his garden in the Walton Cannonry, Salisbury

Leslie Thomas 1931-2014

Leslie Thomas was born in Newport, Monmouthshire, Wales to David James and Dorothy H. Thomas (nee Court) on 22nd March 1931. His father was a stoker on Merchant Navy ships and was rarely home and when he was, would be drunk and violent. His father was killed when a torpedo hit the SS Empire Whale in the Bay of Biscay on 29th March 1943 aged 52. His mother took to her bed and died of cancer in the last quarter of 1943.

Leslie and his brother Roy were sent to a Dr. Barnardo's home near Kingston-on-Thames. To avoid getting beaten up by the bigger boys in the various homes Leslie made up stories and that is where he found his ability which served him all his life as an author. He was at Barnardo's in Kingston when he left school; he did a course in journalism and afterwards worked for a newspaper group.

It was still the era of National Service and he served from 1949-1951. It was while serving he got the idea for his famous *The Virgin Soldiers* book, which won acclaim when it was made into a film.

After demob he worked at various newspapers and agencies. But then he was commissioned by the BBC to write *A Piece of Ribbon*, an army detective story set in Malaya. His first published book, *This Time Next Week* (1964), about his life at Barnardo's, remained continuously in print long after some of his later novels had slipped out of sight.

When he was short of money he was advised to write another book. It was *The Virgin Soldiers* and was to free him from Fleet Street and launch him as a bestselling author whose subsequent novels including *Onward Virgin Soldiers* (1971), *Stand Up Virgin Soldiers* (1975) and *The Magic Army* (1981) were all publicly well received. His final novel, *Soldiers and Lovers* (2007), was a love story set at the end of the Second World War.

He also wrote non-fiction on subjects that he was interested in. *Some Lovely Islands* (1968), *A World of Islands* (1983) and *The Hidden Places of Britain* (1981). He carried on with casual journalism, and remained a familiar presence on radio and television, and in 2005 was appointed OBE. His final book, *Almost Heaven* (2010), was a set of stories relating to Salisbury Cathedral and people connected with it.

In fact he wrote at least one book every year.

Thomas married his second wife, Diana Miles, in 1970. She survives him, as do their son, and the daughter and two sons from his first marriage, in 1956, to Maureen Crane, which ended in divorce. He lived in the Walton Cannonry for many years and later downsized to De Vaux House just on the outskirts of The Close, which is where he died on the 6th May 2014.