Author's Introduction and Reading Group Questions

*Tregian's Ground* is mainly about the birth of the individual conscience, and of tolerance, although many have read and liked the book only for its adventures.

Until very late in the eighteenth century (and not before the French and American Revolutions), the religion of the king was automatically the religion of his subjects. It was a sacred principle for all rulers: *cuius regio eius religio*. In this way, religion was a key aspect of politics. When in the early sixteenth century Christianity was split in two (Catholicism and Protestantism), life became difficult for the subjects, as very soon the two new religions became synonyms for the rule of Spain (the Catholics) on the one hand, and on the other, the rule of the German and Dutch princes and, in England, the rule of the Kings (Henry VIII and Edward VI) and then Queen Elizabeth (the Protestants).

The brief reign of Catholic Queen Mary I and her Spanish husband clinched it: the English didn’t want to be forced into a religion, and at least in the cities, they wanted first to be English. On all sides, the questions started arising: yes, I am a Catholic, a Protestant, a Jew, but I am a loyal subject – can I not be free to practise the religion I believe in?

Francis Tregian finds himself at the centre of this debate. He is forced by his father to be Catholic, but his Queen is Protestant. He is in a situation not dissimilar to that of Hamlet. Shakespeare, who was probably a Catholic, had the same problem: he still remained a staunch subject to the sovereign and declared it. That is why at one point I bring Tregian and Shakespeare together.

Francis Tregian’s way out is music, and his choices show that musically he is neither Catholic nor Protestant. I gathered all the historical facts about Tregian that I could find, but instead of writing a historical essay, I decided to use his story
and its ‘message’ I wanted to write a novel in the vein of one of my literary idols: Alexandre Dumas.

Tregian tries compromising, but fails: he is lost in bad transactions dictated by his father, trying to buy back properties which in fact belong to him. And then comes the critical betrayal (a historical fact): while he desperately needs money to save himself, his father gives away thousands of pounds to the poor in Spain, instead of helping his son.

Having killed Polonius by mistake (after obeying his father’s ghost’s demand for revenge) Hamlet allows himself to be the victim of the plot. Francis Tregian as I conceived him does not accept this. When he realises his father’s betrayal it is too late and he has to go to prison. But he is determined not to remain there: I was inspired by the Tregian family’s oral tradition which has him leaving prison and living for at least a decade under a false name.

By renouncing his name and possessions Francis Tregian makes the highest sacrifice possible to tolerance: he wants to become his own man, without anybody dictating what he has to do.

I had him end up in Echallens because the Echallens church was, at the time, the only one known to be used by both religions. It was famous throughout Europe, and I wanted to emphasise how it was even politically possible to be tolerant when the situation warranted it.

When I wrote Tregian’s Ground, the world was religiously more or less at peace. Re-reading it, I have been struck by how the fundamental message of the story makes it, in a time of renewed religious strife, strikingly topical.

Anne Cuneo, December 2014

Reading Group Questions

1) The religious strife of the sixteenth century forced people to make tough decisions. What are problems arise from sacrificing everything you have for a principle, without thinking of your children, nor accepting any compromise, as Francis Tregian the Elder did? Is it right?

2) The title Tregian’s Ground can be read in two ways, and its double meaning encompasses the whole book. What do you see as this double meaning?

3) Obeying one’s father was a strong principle at the time, and young Francis does his best. What difficulties does he face? How does this affect his other relationships? Is this perhaps his tragic flaw?

4) What parallels can be drawn between Tregian father and son, and Hamlet father and son?

5) Francis finds a kind of freedom in his music. What does this do for him?

6) What price total freedom for Francis Tregian? And is it worth it?

7) A sentence runs throughout the book: ‘Extremities meet’. What does it mean in the context of the novel?

8) I could have written a historical treatise on freedom of conscience, but instead I placed the problem at the heart of a novel. I thought it would be more effective. What do you think?

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