

Foreword to the 2009 edition

by Sebastian Peake (abridged)

In the year 2000 two books came out on the life and work of my father. Although the subject was the same, their tone was very different. At times, it was as though the biographers were writing about two different people. To appreciate someone who could write novels and plays, poems and short stories and at the same time to produce much-admired drawings, illustrations and paintings, requires empathy with the mind and background of the creator.

Sometimes I turn to Malcolm Yorke's biography. Reading his pages, I am left informed, rather than moved; equipped with facts, rather than being drawn into my father's idiosyncratic and highly original world. Peter Winnington's *Vast Alchemies*, however, draws me closer to the spirit and soul of the man I knew, written as it is with remarkable knowledge, erudition and sensitivity for his subject, yet not without objectivity. Both books have their merits, but it is Winnington's book that most successfully enables the reader to appreciate the extraordinary imagination and energy that enabled Mervyn Peake, within little more than a quarter of a century, to produce such a remarkable and considerable body of work....

Vast Alchemies follows my father's early life in China to his student days in London, the two halcyon years in the Channel Islands, his job as a teacher London and his development as a novelist following army call-up and his experiences as a war artist during the Second World War. Then comes the second period on Sark, the return to England at the beginning of the difficult 1950s and his decline as Parkinson's disease ensnared him in its remorseless grip.

This latest incarnation of the book expands on the original

text and includes numerous unpublished drawings and paintings.

I thoroughly recommend this moving, informative and sympathetic account of a man who still retains a powerful hold over me and over many other admirers of his work.

