

Christopher Sinclair-Stevenson: In Remembrance

by [Guido Mina di Sospiro](#) (March 2025)

I was recently in Jaipur, in India, with my wife. After dining at the hotel, we took the lift to go up to our room. In the lift there was an old woman coming back from the SPA. We chatted briefly; she was English, and had just had the best massage in her life; she felt so rested. Oddly, perhaps uncannily, she looked just like Christopher Sinclair-Stevenson! So strikingly that I whispered as much into my wife's ear, and she agreed. In the room, I did a Google search on Christopher, and sadly discovered his passing, three days before.



Christopher Sinclair-Stevenson

It was as if he or someone/something for him had wanted me to know. Perhaps in India the veils of reality are thinner, and if this lady wasn't actually an avatar of Christopher, she may have been an unconscious medium for a message that obviously got through.

Be it as it may, Christopher Sinclair-Stevenson will be remembered as the last great editor and publisher of the twentieth century. He wasn't only the last great launching publisher, but also a supremely skillful editor. Soon after we met he told me about the book *The Italians*, by Luigi Barzini. Its English edition had wended its way to him, then a very young editor fresh out of Cambridge at Hamish Hamilton, in London. He had found it much too verbose and pruned it down to perfection. The book remains a classic to this day. In 1974 his boss Gillon Aitken, who would go on to become a legendary literary agent, passed on the baton of managing director at Hamish Hamilton to Christopher. In that capacity he launched the career of Paul Theroux, Susan Hill, William Boyd, Jane Gardam and many more. He trusted his instincts; *inter alios*, one day he bought a manuscript that no one else wanted in London for a measly £5,000 advance. That book, *A Year in Provence*, went on to sell six million copies.

In 1985 the US-backed Penguin Group bought Hamish Hamilton; four years later Christopher resigned. "Corporate publishing does not encourage editors' enthusiasms and eccentricities ... [so] an anodyne, homogenised culture has broken out," he told *The Telegraph*. Things have not changed today, if anything they've got worse, but back then he decided to embark in a fight against the monster much like Don Quixote, and founded, with the help of some friends, the "classy independent" publishing house Sinclair-Stevenson Ltd. At first, out of twenty-seven authors, twenty had been with him at Hamish Hamilton, among them Peter Ackroyd, Ann Wilson, William Boyd, Rose Tremain, Sybille Bedford, Bernice Rubens and Maureen Duffy. Things went well initially, but soon his dream proved

indeed quixotic: in 1992 his publishing house was sold at a loss to the conglomerate Reed.

Christopher remained to run the imprint, but he was gradually made redundant by turning him into an "ambassador-at-large." In 1995 Random House bought Sinclair-Stevenson Ltd from Reed, and Christopher was out for good.

He had had a good run since, in 1961, at only twenty-two, he had become an editor at Hamish Hamilton. Thirty-four years later the last of the old-school editors decided to become a literary agent; he did know everyone in the industry, and most of his colleagues held him in high esteem. But, perhaps deliberately, he would never be an agent in the league of his former boss, Gillon Aitken. He ran his business from his cozy South Kensington home; having never learned to use a computer, most of his written communications he would pen in his minute calligraphy, and then either post or fax to the intended recipient.

Obituaries are appearing in the UK about him, telling of his public persona. I have another story to tell, as Christopher, since 1993 all the way to his death, was my mentor, friend, advisor, first reader, and dear, dear friend.

Back in the early Nineties, when he was at the apex of his career and I, an unknown, unpublished writer in my early thirties, a friend, a young woman who had worked for him, introduced me to him. I sent him my novel *Leeward & Windward*. He read it and asked if I might be going to London, as he would like to meet. I went, we met. I was staying at a friend's flat. I remember looking out the window on the first floor to see a tall, besuited gentleman walk quickly towards the flat. He came prepared, with a copy of *Hawksmoor*, the novel by Peter Ackroyd he had published at Hamish Hamilton that had won Best Novel at the 1985 Whitbread Awards and the Guardian Fiction Prize, and that he considered the epitome of literary cleverness. My novel *Leeward & Windward* had so

impressed him, he wanted to know if *I* found *Hawksmoor* any good. He then told me he would pass on my *Leeward & Windward* to his editor-in-chief at Sinclair-Stevenson, though he no longer had the power to influence his decision.

His former employee came back, predictably, with a rejection: by then it was sensible for him to stay away from a book that Christopher absolutely loved; why, by publishing one eccentric book too many, Christopher had sunk his own brainchild. [*Leeward & Windward* would be eventually published in Italy in 2017 (!) to rave reviews.]

And thus began a relationship that has lasted for more than three decades. I was then living in Miami; he, in South Kensington. I'd be working on novel after novel, and more or less twice a month, or thrice when it was a good month, a fax of his would arrive: a few lines, always apropos, always encouraging, never cloying. He alone kept me going. Eventually I finished a novel which he liked very much and submitted to a publisher in London; the latter rejected it, and then came the surprise: "I'm not your agent," Christopher told me over the phone. I was so shocked, I was speechless; he elaborated: "I don't want to be your agent; I want to be your friend."

Two years later, my *The Story of Yew*, the memoirs of a two-thousand-year-old tree, was published, at first in the UK, then in many languages. At the book launch at London's Chelsea Physic Garden it was Christopher who eloquently introduced me and the book to as surprisingly large and attentive audience. Later, when for *The Forbidden Book*, which I had co-written with the British scholar Joscelyn Godwin, we landed Carole Blake as its agent, he rang her to congratulate her warmly, and met for lunch in London with both Joscelyn and me behaving in a extremely amiable way, which wasn't always the case with him. Later on yet, when Gillon Aitken took me on after having read my *The Metaphysics of Ping-Pong*, he met in person with his former boss and told him all sorts of (hopefully good) things about me.

Down the decades, Christopher and I met and had lunch/dinner in London four or five times a year, often with our wives too, and exchanged hundreds upon hundreds of faxes and letters. On the envelopes containing the latter, he invariably penned “Il Marchese Mina di Sospiro”, which is heraldically correct, but I must say, only he was being heraldically correct with me. He was my first reader and advisor, and perhaps I was not just his protégé, but the son he had never had.

His wife Deborah and he had been ill for a few years; after she passed away, he had a catastrophic fall at home from which he never fully recovered. Aileen, a relative of his I met a few months ago when I went to visit Christopher at the nursing home in London, told me after his death that he just did not want to live any longer. I will always remember his last words to me. In his room at the nursing home, Aileen made him aware that I was there to see him; bedridden and semiconscious, he opened his eyes for a moment, looked at me and said, “Hello, Guido,” in the sweetest tone, he who in the past had at times known how to be stern and almost curt when speaking to me. He then closed his eyes and smiled. It was as if he were greeting me already from Heaven.

My wife and I and the world will miss him very, very much.

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Guido Mina di Sospiro was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, into an ancient Italian family. He was raised in Milan, Italy and was educated at the University of Pavia as well as the USC School of Cinema-Television, now known as USC School of Cinematic Arts. He has been living in the United States since the 1980s, currently near Washington, D.C. He is the author of several books including, [The Story of Yew](#), [The Forbidden Book](#), [The Metaphysics of Ping Pong](#), and [Forbidden Fruits](#).

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