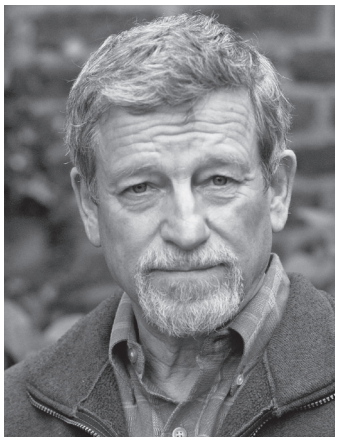
In the Footsteps of Giants

An Interview With Michael Scammell

Biographer Michael Scammell has devoted much of his long career to writing about two of the 20th century's foremost intellectuals, whose impassioned writings defined in human and moral terms the stakes in the struggle against communism. Scammell's book about the Nobel Prize–winning dissident Russian writer Alexsandr Solzhenitsyn, *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography*, published in 1984, was the first major biography to shed light on this towering yet secretive figure. *Koestler: The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth-Century Skeptic*, which came out last year to much acclaim, revived the reputation of the protean Hungarian writer Arthur Koestler, best known for his 1940 anti-totalitarian novel *Darkness at Noon*.



Michael Scammell has written epic biographies of two of the 20th century's most enigmatic writers.

Scammell was born in 1935 and grew up in a working-class family near Southampton, England. Attracted to writing from an early age, he landed a job as a messenger for a local newspaper at 16. Two years later, he was drafted into the army and, as luck would have it, was sent to school to learn Russian. At the conclusion of his military service, Scammell studied Russian at Nottingham University and then at Columbia University, where he earned a PhD (and currently teaches translation and writing). He took up translating, and his first effort, the experimental novel *Cities and Years*, by Konstantin Fedin, caught the eye of Vladimir Nabokov, who asked Scammell to help translate two of his early Russian-language novels, *The Gift* and *The Defense*, into English. Eventually, Scammell would translate many other books from Russian into English, including works by Feodor Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy.

In the early 1970s Scammell helped found *Index on Censorship*, a magazine that continues to defend writers against state persecution and bring their censored texts to the attention of the public. He served as the magazine's editor for nearly a decade, published Solzhenitsyn's work, and started on the path to becoming one of today's most widely admired biographers. In 1985 he was a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, where he studied the emigration of artists who left the Soviet Union to work in the West.

Writer and translator Michael McDonald interviews Scammell about his life and work.

Michael McDonald is general counsel of the National Endowment for the Humanities as well as an essayist and translator. The views expressed here are those of the author and not of the U.S. government.

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHEN SCAMMELL

Soviet dissident writer Alexsandr Solzhenitsyn won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970, but international acclaim didn't save him from deportation after his scathing book *The Gulag Archipelago* was published. Here he peers at reporters gathered outside his house in Zurich in 1974.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES ANDANSON/SYGMA/CORBIS

MICHAEL MCDONALD: How did you become a biographer?

MICHAEL SCAMMELL: A big question. Until I was in my early twenties, all I wanted to do was write fiction. I tried many times, but came to the conclusion that I didn't have the stamina for it, so I turned to translation, putting the words of foreign writers into English—which is a kind of creativity: creativity with language but not with thought. I also wrote a large number of reviews of other people's books, but it was only in the period right before the *Index on Censorship* came along that the idea of writing a biography about Solzhenitsyn first occurred to me.

MCDONALD: And so what did you do?

SCAMMELL: Well, I was a freelancer—a polite term for unemployed—at the time, so I extorted a tiny advance and went off to collect everything I could find out about Solzhenitsyn's life. Looking back, it's curious that I had the biographical itch from the beginning, because I could have written about many things, I suppose, and it didn't necessarily need to be a biography, but that was the way I thought about it. However, Solzhenitsyn was so successful at covering his tracks that I couldn't find out nearly enough to satisfy me, and I simply gave up.

MCDONALD: But the seed had been planted.

SCAMMELL: Yes. And as I moved from freelancing to editing the *Index on Censorship* full-time, I got to publish a lot of dissident literature from the Soviet Union—Solzhenitsyn obviously being the most stellar dissident writer of them all. In time, I ferreted out some early poetry by Solzhenitsyn that I'd found in samizdat, and out of the blue I was contacted by Dr. Fritz Heeb, a lawyer in Zurich—the German writer

Heinrich Böll had found him for Solzhenitsyn—who asked me to stop. Solzhenitsyn suspected the poems had come from the KGB, but when he learned about the samizdat source, he relented and agreed to the publication.

I got drawn in deeper when Heeb later contacted me to ask if I could manage the translation and publication of Solzhenitsyn's heartfelt plea for democratic reforms in the Soviet Union, *Letter to the Soviet Leaders*. This was in 1974, after the KGB's discovery of the manuscript of *The Gulag Archipelago* and literally days before Solzhenitsyn's arrest. We worked round the clock at *Index* to get the *Letter* out in the form of a slim book, and got caught up in the whole drama of Solzhenitsyn's arrest and deportation. And always at the back of my mind was this idea that I should one day write Solzhenitsyn's biography.

McDonald: But you must also have been attracted in some way to Solzhenitsyn. Why else devote so many years of your life to writing about his?

Scammell: Well, at that point I had no idea how many years it would take. The main thing was that for me, Solzhenitsyn was an iconic figure, a larger-than-life hero like no other I had come close to. First of all there was his titanic struggle with the censorship that was the main subject of my magazine, making him the greatest exemplar of freedom of expression of our times. In thinking about his life and his work and publishing work by him, I was advancing my own ideas of freedom of expression and my ideas about the nature of a regime—the Soviet regime—that totally suppressed it. In writing the life of Solzhenitsyn, I would be promoting ideas and values that were dear to me, and, in my commentary, bringing my own views to bear.

McDonald: Was there a similar fascination with Koestler?

Scammell: Not at first. The early part of my professional life overlapped with the latter part of Koestler's writing life. In fact, I had met him once and was fully aware of who he was. By that time he was writing about science and even parascience, and the notion of writing his life never occurred to me. But the urge to write a biography comes about in a variety of ways. In this instance, I was approached by Koestler's last editor and literary executor, Harold Harris, who had admired the Solzhenitsyn book and thought I might be right for Koestler. There was one existing biography, written during Koestler's lifetime, which was woefully inadequate and was disowned by Koestler—rightly, I think. So I sat down and read a lot of his work, reacquainted myself with *Darkness at Noon* and his autobiographies, read some secondary material, and then decided I had plenty to write about.

McDonald: Koestler is quite different from Solzhenitsyn, isn't he?

Scammell: Yes and no. He's an interesting counterpart and an interesting contrast to Solzhenitsyn. Unlike Solzhenitsyn, he wasn't born into and didn't grow up in a tumultuous, revolutionary society, though he did have one experience of revolution in his teens. But in an odd way, Koestler's progress mimics Solzhenitsyn's. He was born 13 years earlier than Solzhenitsyn, in 1905, before World War I, in Hungary. He had a perfectly straightforward bourgeois upbringing, and was a Zionist for a while, before discovering and embracing communism. It's often forgotten that Solzhenitsyn, too, was a believing communist as a young man, until he turned against it. Long before Solzhenitsyn, however, Koestler became one of the 20th century's most powerful critics of communist mythology and behavior. He was a cosmopolitan, free to travel the world in a way forbidden to Solzhenitsyn, and he was broader in his interests than Solzhenitsyn, but I don't think he was deeper. If anything, Solzhenitsyn was the deeper writer.

McDonald: Solzhenitsyn the hedgehog versus Koestler the fox?

Scammell: Yes, Koestler was very much a fox. He had a million different interests, and, by the way, knew and clashed intellectually with the popularizer of that metaphor, Isaiah Berlin.

McDonald: Was that part of what attracted you to him?

Scammell: What Koestler embodied was something else that represents an important side of my own character. He was fascinated by the idea of utopia, by the ideal of human happiness. He was desperate to find a way to build a perfect society—or, if you like, a less imperfect society than the one we have now—and spent most of his life beating his brains out in search of a solution. I eventually concluded he was innately a mystic, though he rejected religion out of hand, even when he was a Zionist. Lacking the religious option, he was left with varieties of politics—and later science and social science—as prospective means of improving society.

McDonald: Who, if anyone, did you take as your model in writing your lives of Solzhenitsyn and Koestler?

Scammell: There's no doubt in my mind that James Boswell is the greatest biographer of all time, and the one against whom I measure my own accomplishments, such as they are.

McDonald: Boswell, the greatest biographer of all time—or simply in the English language?

Scammell: No, of all time. Don't forget, biography has been much more fully developed—and for a much longer time—in the English language and in English literature than in others. If you look at French literature, Russian literature—the two others I know best—or even German literature, you won't find a strong biographical tradition, and their contemporary biographies ape English and American models. You have to go back to classical times to discover a well-developed school of biography: Plutarch with his Greek and Roman lives, and so forth. Imitations of his biographical works followed in all European languages in succeeding centuries, but it took Dr. Johnson, who had one foot firmly planted in the ancient classical tradition, to challenge the reigning conventions. He was the one who first opened up English literature to biography as an art. In one of his books, *The Life of Mr. Richard Savage*, he came close to producing a biography with the vividness and modernism that characterized Boswell's. Boswell, building on Johnson's experiments, created the art of biography in the modern sense of the word.

McDonald: What makes Boswell the best?

Scammell: Well, one astonishing aspect of his work is that Boswell didn't spend all that much time with Johnson and didn't know him half as well as he pretended. If you go through his book and add up how often Boswell saw Johnson, and for how long, it amounts to a period of only 15 years, out of Johnson's more than 70. But Boswell's genius lies in the vividness with which he brings his encounters with Johnson to life. It's Boswell's scene painting that made such a big impression on me, as well as the way in which he organizes his material around those scenes and the interviews he contrived to have with Johnson. At the end of your reading, you feel you've been living with Dr. Johnson for a very long time and have really come to know him.

McDonald: No one more recent?

Scammell: A modern example of a well-done Boswellian biography that I greatly admire is Gerald Clarke's life of Truman Capote, which appeared in 1988. Clarke, like Boswell, knew and admired his subject personally for many years. Quite early on, he and Capote agreed that he would write Capote's biography, so Capote, as it were, "sat" for his portrait over many years. Like Boswell, Clarke crams his book with vivid scenes and drama, in many cases relying on things that he saw or heard himself. But that's rare. I also admire Richard Ellmann's biographies of James Joyce and Oscar Wilde, which strike me as the acme of academic literary biography. Ellmann wears his learning lightly, and succeeds in making serious subjects entertaining. He also excels at marshaling and wielding his sources by organizing his material to maximum literary effect.

McDonald: What about the Bloomsbury writer Lytton Strachey and the new form of psychological biography he pioneered in the post–World War I era?

Scammell: I've read Strachey very carefully, but he's no model for me. The biographies in *Eminent Victorians* are mostly very short and written in a satirical vein as part of a wide-ranging polemic against the hypocrisy and moral turpitude of Victorian England. His skill is immense, but he turns the exhortation

Arthur Koestler is best known for his anti-Stalinist novel *Darkness at Noon* (1940), which reflected his own disillusionment with communism.

of Ecclesiasticus, "Let us now praise famous men," completely on its head.

McDonald: It used to be said that the biographer who's done his work well vanishes into the shadow of his creative achievement. But then you have books—most famously, perhaps, Edmund Morris's life of Ronald Reagan, *Dutch*—in which the biographer has a walk-on role or may even take center stage. What do you think of this development?

Scammell: I think it arises out of jealousy and a sort of mild desperation. It's very tempting to wonder, "Why should I give up so much of my life to writing about another person?" And sometimes the biographer may get fed up and say, "Well, actually, I want to be here, too. I'm important." We biographers are generally self-effacing, but there comes a point where we don't want to efface ourselves anymore, or at least not so completely. Another influence is the modern sense of the narrator as performer. Janet Malcolm is very good at this sort of thing, though her books aren't biographies in the usual sense. But she writes about biographical matters, and this conceit enables her—and the rest of us—to step forward in our own person and give our views about people we meet and the issues raised by our work and our writing. When I began work on the Koestler biography, I tried that approach, too.

McDonald: What happened?

Scammell: I wrote a draft of the first few pages in the present tense—the present tense works particularly well when you are striving for immediacy—and I described making my way through the old city of Buda, crossing one of its famous bridges to get to the more modern part of the city known as Pest (hence Budapest), and walking up the main avenue to where Koestler was

PHOTOGRAPH BY BETTMANN/CORBIS

born. Then I stood in front of his parents' apartment building and began to narrate the story of Koestler's birth and his family history, and so on and so forth.

McDonald: What stopped you from continuing on in that way?

Scammell: I found it uncomfortably self-serving. If I wanted to write about my own life and travels, I should simply do that, I thought. It also wasn't functional. If I could have said that my approach illuminated important matters that I couldn't do so well otherwise, it would have been legitimate—and I'm not saying it can't be done. But in my case, it was a distraction. Thirdly, there was the sheer volume and weight of fact and information I had to deal with, so that introducing a personal story line would have enlarged it without adding much of value. The conventions are there for a reason. So I maintained the goal of presenting Koestler's life in as lively a manner as possible—with lots of "show" as well as "tell"—but in the usual third-person style. Of course, I also tried to avoid the opposite temptation, which is to overload the narrative with facts and data simply because you have them. To earn their place, they have to pass a certain test.

McDonald: Namely?

Scammell: The test Horace set out for writers so many centuries ago: Not merely to instruct, by piling fact upon fact, but to delight, to entertain. Fact is fundamental, but the biographer has a duty to be selective. A great deal of what you gather and what you know—and this is true of even a large biography like mine of Koestler—remains underwater, and what the reader sees is only the tip of the iceberg.

McDonald: How do you view the essential difference between being a novelist and a biographer?

Scammell: To paraphrase the British literary critic Desmond MacCarthy, the biographer is the novelist on oath. He captured both parts of what's important. Where he was very astute was in recognizing that the biographer is using the same arsenal of devices as the novelist; that is to say, the biographer is using characterization. It's not simply enough to take the sum total of people's impressions of someone, to collect them and put them all down on the page; a biographer has to select, too. One has to be able to set a scene in such a way that the reader is drawn in and convinced by what one has written, and that too is a novelistic gift.

McDonald: Facts alone don't convince?

Scammell: It depends on the genre, but facts alone can never convince the reader. At the very least, there has to be an argument. In a biography, if the facts aren't artfully presented, you end up with a flattened portrait. Let me put it this way: Quite a bit has been written about the suspension of disbelief in fiction. My wife, who reads more novels than I do, has a habit of picking up a novel, starting it, and then all of a sudden she'll throw it on the table or chair. I say, "What's wrong?" She'll respond, "I don't believe in this anymore." And the biographer has the exact same problem. It's twofold: One, does the reader believe what the biographer is saying to him about the subject of the biography? And, two, does the reader believe that the biographer has found the best way to say it? Of course, biographers also rely heavily on the intrinsic interest of their subjects, often too heavily, in my opinion, but credibility is even more important in biography than in fiction, because fiction is made up.

This touches on the other aspect of MacCarthy's dictum: the oath. As a biographer, you must write only what you know (or think you know), what is genuinely fact based. You can't make up a whole new character for your subject. You cannot—and here is where I think Edmund Morris went wrong in his biography of Reagan—imagine scenes and say, "This is what he would have been doing or thinking. I know it, because I know the rest of his life." You can put down only what you have sources for—preferably more than one source. What you do, if you can, is get as many different accounts of your subject's character and behavior as possible, and, in effect, you triangulate.

McDonald: How so?

Scammell: One of my favorite scenes in the Koestler

biography is when Koestler, Simone de Beauvoir, Camus, and Sartre were all at a party at the home of [the French novelist and musician] Boris Vian. They each reported different things about that party, but none of them knew what any of the others had written. I found their accounts, and I was able to show it in 3-D, as it were, melding the different versions and revealing several layers of meaning. The oath is against invention; if you're not sure of something, you don't put it in. But when you have a variety of sources, you can put them together for the reader in such a way that the reader is also convinced and nods his head and says, "Ah yes, I see. I now know what Koestler didn't know at the time, or Camus, or Sartre, or Simone de Beauvoir, for that matter, and I understand." You need a novelist's skill in timing and setting a scene, but also a biographer's honesty in sticking to the known facts.

TO EARN THEIR PLACE, facts have to pass the test Horace set out for writers so many centuries ago: Not merely to instruct, but to entertain.

McDonald: But isn't the besetting biographical temptation, at least when the facts are either murky or missing, to fill in the blanks by seeking patterns in the subject's life?

Scammell: Yes, the temptation to find patterns is very seductive, and I wouldn't say I always resisted it. You do tend to put two and two together and have a hypothesis about how something's going to turn out. But this is where the oath comes in. If you can't find the smoking gun, you can't convict, but you still have two options. You don't necessarily omit the possible—or probable—existence of a gun, but you have to be frank with the reader. You have to confess and say, "This is what I think may have occurred, but I can't prove it." And that way you have your cake and eat it, too. The thought and the image are planted in the reader's mind, but you don't claim more for it than you can back up with evidence. It's also true that one is always looking for the subject to behave as you would have predicted he would. On the other hand, it's very valuable when you come across something that contradicts the pattern, and better still, the reader's expectations, because the reader suddenly realizes your subject is an autonomous human being and unpredictable and liable to do and say surprising things—even perhaps surprising himself.

McDonald: How do you begin writing a biography? Do you read everything first?

Scammell: I began in different places. In the case of Solzhenitsyn, the book grew out of my interest in Russian literature and in Soviet dissident writers. It sort of grew on me, to the point where I was able to filter my concerns through the personality of Solzhenitsyn, and then translate my fascination with his personality into a project to write his life. In the case of Koestler, it was a question of feeling an affinity not so much with his personality as with his profile as a writer and with the subjects of his writing—a kind of sociopolitical affinity, if you will. With Solzhenitsyn, the book came more naturally, because I had known my subject over a long period of time. With Koestler, I sat down and read a lot of his work in one gulp before deciding to write about him.

McDonald: How much time did that take? Koestler's body of writing is enormous.

Scammell: I was teaching full-time, so I had to work on the book in the summer and winter vacations and during what spare time I could muster. The big initial read probably happened during a summer vacation, when I read *Darkness at Noon*, *Arrival and Departure* (his third novel), his autobiographies, and some of the essays in *The Yogi and the Commissar*. My imagination was fired both by what I read that summer and by some commentaries on his work. As with Solzhenitsyn,

I formed an image of him in my mind. I think this aspect of the work is underemphasized in the art of biography, which brings us back to the comparison between novels and biographies: One forms an image in one's mind pretty early on about who this person is, and then it becomes a question of testing it and adjusting it on the basis of what one finds out as one goes along. Sometimes you have to make huge revisions to the image, sometimes smaller revisions, but as a biographer, you need that kind of shining light up ahead of you—the image that draws you on. Then it's a matter of putting flesh on it and making it three-dimensional.

McDonald: And as you put more flesh on your subject's image, your view of it changes, right?

Scammell: Of course. For instance, Solzhenitsyn up close turned out to be a far less saintly figure than he had seemed from afar, which was all to the good from the biographical point of view, because it makes him more human. Koestler, on the other hand, who has always had a bad reputation for his character, grew in my estimation. Of course, I never thought of him as a saint, but I did become more aware of the forces and obsessions that contributed to his frailties and that in many ways he was helpless to oppose. So my admiration for him, which would certainly strike many reviewers as odd, grew, and I became more sympathetic to him as my work progressed.

McDonald: Given the oppressive weight of modern archives, how do you know that you've read enough?

Scammell: It's a combination of things. Let's just take a prosaic and yet important practical consideration. Biography is rife with examples of people who don't finish for 20 or 25 years—or perhaps ever—and this is often a result of reluctance to stop researching. There's always more to find out. But after a certain point in time, even they feel the pressure. Others around you (your agent, your publisher, your spouse) are pressing you to finish, and you begin to feel ridiculous. Another unheroic explanation is sheer exhaustion. You may feel there's important information still out there, but you don't have the strength or time or inclination to go further. But it's more complicated than that, because research and writing aren't completely separated from one another, and it's not as if you come to the complete end of one before starting the other. There does, however, come that moment when you begin to grapple with the writing in a serious way. You grow impatient with the collection of material; you can't wait to explore your notes and get your cherished insights down on paper. At the back of your mind is the fear of losing your freshness and growing stale. At last, you feel you've covered all the main bases, you've gathered up all the relevant material, and whatever else you collect is not going to change the picture you've built up in any significant way.

McDonald: What's the most significant thing that reviewers of biographies tend to miss?

Scammell: It mainly comes down to a disregard for craft. I'm aware that space allotted for book reviews is usually short and that most attention should rightfully be directed toward the subject, but the one or two token sentences of praise or dispraise you get in the average review are disappointing, especially when you've put so much effort into the composition and literary effects of your work. This is another area in which biographies are taken less seriously than novels, and that's frustrating for a biographer.

McDonald: Is there a code of ethics for a biographer?

Scammell: It's very simple: Don't lie. Of course, when you break that commandment down and start to analyze it, you realize it's not that simple after all. You can, after all, without technically lying, create a false picture. Or you can try to force the reader to conclusions that are not truly justified by the evidence. I think that voice also plays a role here. Can you trust that person who's telling you all these things and setting out the evidence for them, or is there something shady and evasive about it? The judgment is quite subjective, of course, and readers don't always agree, but I have faith in the ability of most intelligent readers to spot the difference.

McDonald: Does the public have a right to know everything about a writer? W. H. Auden, for one, thought that a writer's personal sins, sufferings, and weaknesses are of absolutely no interest.

Scammell: He wasn't the only one. Thomas Hardy ordered all his letters and diaries burnt after his death, and virtually dictated a biography of the early part of his life to his much younger wife and secretary. James Joyce referred to biographers as "biografiends," and then you have the famous Oscar Wilde quote about each great man having his disciples and how it's the Judas among them who ends up writing his biography. There's a long tradition of that, I think, and to a certain extent they're right, for biographers do in a sense exploit their subjects for their own ends.

McDonald: Some say biographies deflate the novelist's work—that they rob the work of its autonomy.

Scammell: Do they? In my experience, they almost always turn readers' attention back to the work, not away from it, and I can't really think of any great or good novel, poem, or play that I've read—knowing much more about the background of the work—that's been diminished by a biography.

McDonald: Auden disagreed; but then he himself was a voracious reader of biography.

Scammell: "Do as I say, not as I do" is the motto there, I think. I found that in the cases of Solzhenitsyn and Koestler there came a point at which they became—subconsciously, and then consciously—aware of the figure they were cutting in the world, of the impression they wanted to make, and deliberately worked on it. And perhaps it's this self-created image some are afraid of losing.

Whatever the case, the biographer has to contend with the image his subject has built up for the public. I find it interesting to go behind the image and compare it with the known facts and with how writers were seen by contemporaries who knew them well. It enriches one's perspective. In the case of Koestler, it was extremely interesting to compose the biography of someone who'd written two extensive autobiographies, *Arrow in the Blue* and *The Invisible Writing*, along with such autobiographical works as *Dialogue With Death*, *Scum of the Earth*, and the lead essay in *The God That Failed*. In a way, I was in competition with those works—except I could never imitate Koestler's style or write as vividly as he did. But I was able to approach his life with a different aim and to illuminate the same events from a different point of view, and this only increased my admiration for him. The more I researched the facts and the more I became acquainted with the sources, the more I discovered how truthful Koestler was about his past. Like any writer, he embroidered a bit, and there were omissions, of course. But very, very rarely did I find something that was patently untrue, and that he knew to be untrue.

McDonald: What do you think of writing a biography in order to get behind the myth a writer has constructed about himself or herself?

Scammell: If you mean negatively behind the myth, I don't have much sympathy with it. I think it's a modern trend that probably takes its cue from Strachey, whose goal was to debunk his subjects. But they were political actors, not writers, and that sort of thing belongs to a different genre. Why write a biography? Why not simply write an essay to demonstrate that someone's reputation is overblown, that they are untalented or immoral or whatever it is you want to say? But to write a whole biography to demonstrate that the idol has clay feet doesn't appeal to me.

McDonald: How would you react if you learned you were the subject of a biographer?

Scammell: That's a wonderful question. I've never thought about it before. I would be very uneasy, I think. I would immediately recall all of the sins, ungracious acts, lies—white and not so white—I've been guilty of at different times in my life. I would be fearful of the weaknesses—my own and those of others—that would inevitably come out in the open. And I would argue that whoever is writing the biography should wait until I'm dead.

McDonald: But if you knew someone was on the trail of *your* life, would you cooperate?

Scammell: I'm not sure. I'd probably say what Solzhenitsyn first said to me: "I won't stop you." ■