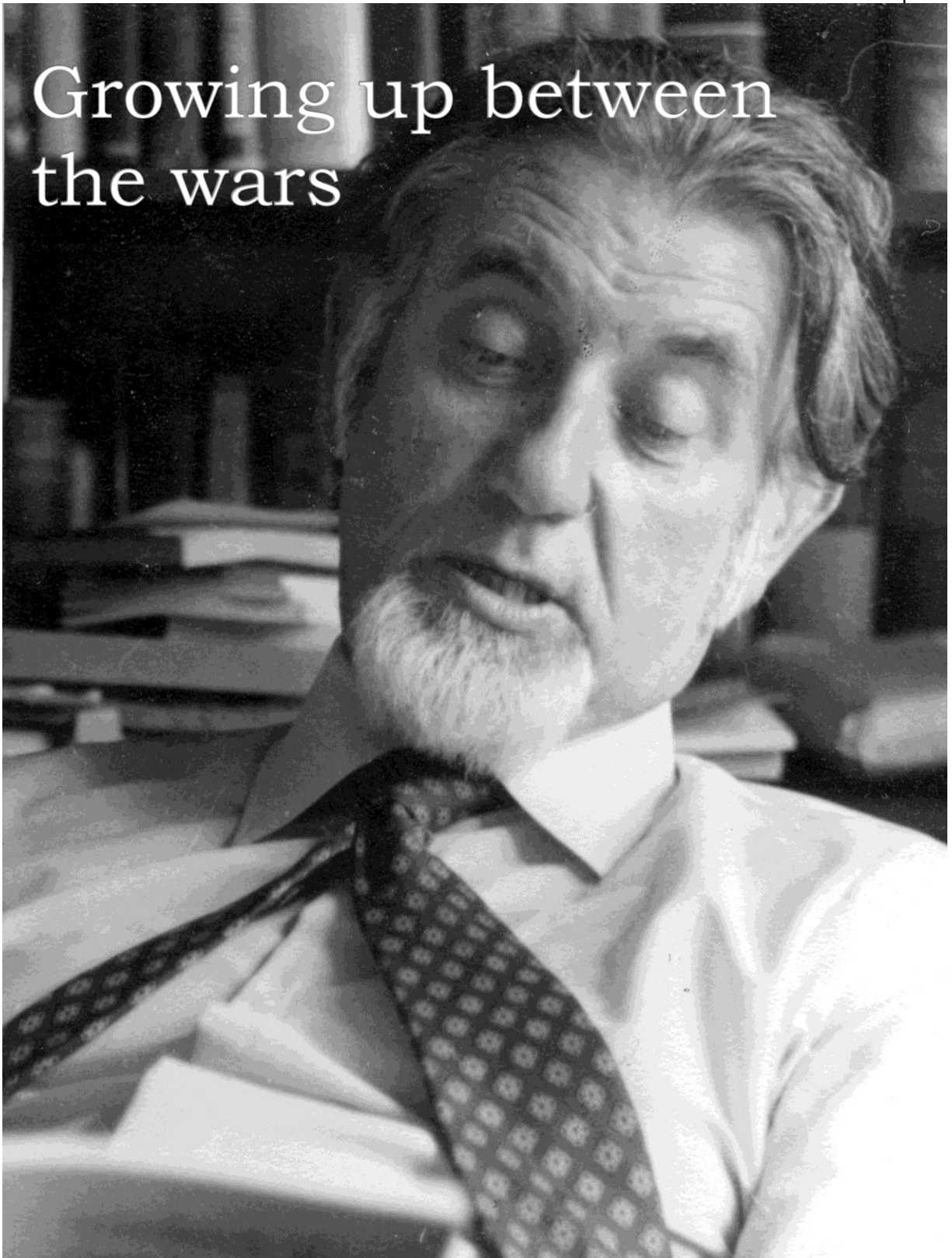


Growing up between  
the wars



## Reminiscences

Ron Gray

Emmanuel College Cambridge



Ronald Douglas Gray was born in London in 1919. His father was a postal clerk in Esso, his grandfather was a fireman. Although his sister Sally was 6 years younger, they were always very close. He won a scholarship to Emmanuel College in 1938 and apart from the war years and a year in Switzerland, he stayed at Emmanuel for the rest of his life. He married Pat in 1942 and they had been married 55 years when she died in 1997. He died 19 November 2015, after spending many happy years with Dorothy Sturley.

Ron probably started writing these autobiographical pieces in the 1990s. He tucked them away and claimed to have forgotten all about them when he handed them to John and me a few years before he died. He never forgot or mislaid anything he had written, so I think he meant that they weren't finished. At that time he was immersed in writing about Shakespeare's Sonnets and I'm sure he didn't want to spend time doing anything else. On the other hand he didn't want them to be forgotten altogether.

Sue Perutz (née Gray)  
October 2016



Klassik Stiftung Weimar

Even so my Sunne one early morne did shine,  
With all triumphant splendor on my brow.

Sonnet 33



## CLAPHAM COMMON

The Bombing Field was where they trained men in the War of 1914-18 to throw hand grenades, but only the name remained, twelve years later. Looking out over its flat expanse I savoured the wonder of seven weeks' holiday, only just beginning. Blue sky, a low line of trees far off, and endless time to enjoy this unbelievable leisure. Till now I had had only four weeks, in the summer, but that was at the primary school. The extra three were a foretaste, the Common had become a savannah, as I thought when I learned the word a few years later.

In this part of London a boy had more scope for exploring and playing games than many country boys, confined between hedges and crops. The Common had acres of entertainment, highflying kites that had to be winched down, model yachts zigzagging in races across the pond, a bandstand with a Sunday band, and, more to our liking, a concert-party with comedians to be watched by grown-ups from deckchairs, while we pressed against spiked railings and chattered, longing for the singing turns to give way to the comedians. At summer lunch-time we drifted for an hour on the way home from school over to the other pond, caught daddy long-legs and floated them in matchboxes towards the round island, where, they said, people who died in the Plague were buried. In winter one year there was a snowball fight between opposing lines of infantry. At all seasons there was football on the Ashes, a field covered in black cinders where games were permitted and occasionally a fair set itself up. But if you fell there, you had red grazes mixing blood and black dust, and we preferred the grassed fields, with jackets and jumpers piled for goalposts. When a common-keeper appeared in his thick brown jacket and trousers and brown Australian hat, someone would shout 'Commie!' and we'd scramble for the side-streets where he couldn't run us through with the steel, pointed rod he used for picking up litter. He was not allowed to touch you, once you were off the Common. You could buy a Sno-frute from the Wall's tricycle man, and not get caught, being on the pavement, so some boys said. But in the Bushes hundreds of gnarled hawthorns grew, each on a little mound, some of their branches polished grey with our climbs. The Commie could surprise you. As you stalked behind a mound unobserved by the others in the game who had captured your friends, your redskin impersonation could come face to face with reality.

All this was in prospect that happy day. I was still too young to know what pleasures the Bushes gave by night, or the Ashes on Sunday afternoons. In the days before television and before the universal spread of motor-cars, the Ashes were a kind of Hyde Park Corner, a Speakers' Ground where anyone could set up his soapbox and battle with a sceptical, derisive audience. The man who believed everyone should have third party insurance used

not a soapbox but a ladder; he would go up a few steps and lean over the flat top. Most of the time he would have the crowd on his side, and he would work for that. 'Ave a look at this (a drawing of a tall oblong with horizontal lines). You thought it was your old woman's face, didn't you? Well you're wrong, it's the back of a bus'. As the laughs went up, he took a letter from his inside pocket: 'Ere, and that from British Leyland, "Dear Sir" - "Sir", they call me' - and there were more laughs at his pretence of modesty. But it all led to his conclusion, that British Leyland had built a bus with a bar across the rear window that would, if the bus ever fell on its side, prevent a fat woman escaping through it. The applause for this argument was qualified: 'Go on, Bill, tell 'em about your new lifeboats for the Mauritania.' But the enthusiasm, real or not, was enough to bring him back again next week, or the week after.

Less often there was Anthony Tudor, a trim man in a bowler-hat and pin-striped suit with rolled umbrella who unfolded a theatre-queue seat, stood on it, and gave us the gist of his legal claim to be King of England. The Princes in the Tower had not both been murdered: one had escaped, and Anthony was descended from him, despite his Welsh name, used by Kings later than the Princes. He was therefore the rightful heir to the throne, and once crowned would fill the pond with beer and throw all the coppers in. 'Last week', he said in 1936, 'I was waiting with my trusty henchmen at Trafalgar Square as the royal procession passed. I was going to throw the Duke of York out and go on to Westminster Abbey to be crowned.' But a summons from the Governor of the Bank of England to discuss his issue of personal banknotes had got in the way. He would sell these banknotes, but only after he had left the field for the pavement, where he turned his bowler upside down.

The Salvation Army, conducting services under a ring of trees and inviting us to sing hymns to the accompaniment of the band, were treated seriously. 'Blood and Fire' on their banner sounded convincing, and so did the speakers, though that was as far as it went. The Elim Tabernaclers were too intense to notice interruption: A fat man on crutches was in nonstop ecstasy: 'Oh my friends, the blessed Lord, he sends the blessed sun, he sends the blessed rain, bless his sun, bless his rain, bless his holy Name.' The Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints, or Mormons, suffered for their inadequate history. Joseph Smith their founder had received messages from God, inscribed on metal plates, and placed them in a bank safe-deposit, from which they had vanished. 'The plates, the plates, what you done with the plates. Lorst 'em you 'ave.' This was almost all you ever heard round that platform. The Catholic Evidence Guild suffered in the same way. 'Take a question, Mr Speaker? Take a question? What did the Pope say in '81', eh? Ah, you won't tell us, will you! Bogey, bogey.' No other topic than Papal infallibility ever got off the ground.

The Fascists met more serious but still ironical opposition. Arriving in twos or threes in a dark van with bars over the windows they never tried in the open air the strong-arm tactics they used at Olympia and other meeting-halls, and so suffered taunts and jeers without redress. 'Mr Speaker, in view of the Italian Government's recent expedition to Abyssinia, would you please outline the policy of your party with regard to an embargo on peanuts.' They took it all like lambs.

The really popular performer was a down-and-out, with a Red Indian's lean look, dressed in a wide brimmed black hat, long gabardine, and longer trousers, almost the image of the anarchist Popski in the children's cartoon of Pip, Squeak and Wilfred, three animals who continually foiled the revolutionary's attempts at explosions. He seemed to be a revolutionary in his own right, certainly an anarchist, though he made his living by giving extempore talks on whatever he happened to be reading at the time - you often saw him in the Public Reference Library. No platform for him. He would stand with his chin in his hand, head bowed, till an audience had drifted over from the other speakers, look loweringly from under his brow and insist on a space some fifteen yards long and five or six wide in which he could walk up and down, and in due time begin. It might be Shelley, it might be Dostoevsky, it might be Ramsay Macdonald or Stanley Baldwin. Taking long strides he would point downward, arm straight out, to emphasise a point. About turn, and he would fix someone in the audience as he stalked past, challenging us with the dilemma of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, with verses from Prometheus Unbound or the Masque of Anarchy. It was far more exciting stuff than anything I heard at school, though I hadn't a penny to put in his hat when he strode away to the pavement by the roadside, where he could legally make a collection. I owe a lot of my concern with literature to him rather than to my formal teachers, as I owed a lot to all of them on the Ashes for their weekly kaleidoscope of fanaticism, fancy, dottiness and earnestness. They made religion, philosophy, literature, politics, come alive. Traffic and television drove them away. But not before I had had a go myself. By the time I was 17 I was standing on a platform there myself, competing with them all for an audience. That story, however, will have to come later. The Common comes first as one of the shaping things in the rest of my life.

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

My first school was Wix's Lane, a building of three stories in neo-Dutch red brick, a London County Council school:

London County Council L.C.C.  
I love you and  
You love me

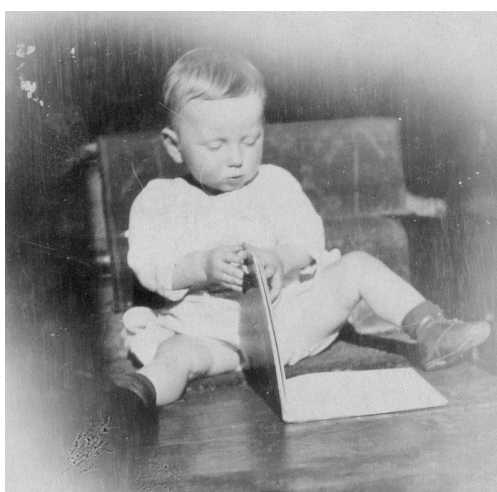
as the girls sang in the next playground, skipping. After Infants, ground floor, we never saw the girls. Boys were first floor, but used a separate staircase. Strict discipline. Playtime games stopped when the whistle blew; you stood to attention. Next whistle quick march to your class lines. Next whistle first class quick march, second class following, third class and so on. Up the stairs in two files, keeping strictly to each side.

'I've got a touch of liver this morning boys, so watch out.' But Charlie Allen wasn't a tyrant like Mr Cox, who literally rapped boys over the knuckles with the edge of a ruler. Still, we learned our tables with Cox, chanting in chorus from twice one are two to the final, shouted relief at twelve twelves are a hundred and forty-four. And they were generally gentle, the teachers. I jumped a class coming up from the Infants, and was bewildered when white-haired Jumbo Wilson dictated a sum involving hundredweights. 'C.W.T., boy, write C.W.T.!' I must have thought they were someone's initials and despaired. But I warmed to Mr Vivian, an enthusiastic Welshman who ran the scholarship class, in which I must have spent two or three years. I disappointed him by refusing to choose as my prize the Works of William Shakespeare, despite his urging. I preferred *South with Scott*, though I never read it. He made me inkwell monitor for a week, which I repaid by stabbing the boy who thought his turn had come before I thought it had. I used an inked pen-nib on the back of his neck. But Daddy Gray the headmaster let me off with a kind caution. I knew I wasn't really guilty, and would have been startled if he'd told me to bend over. He won my admiration later by leaning over after I had read the lesson in morning assembly and complimenting me, when I saw he had hairs in his nostrils, and later still by taking a lesson himself, offering to tell us the derivation of any words we chose to ask about. I served him a dolly: 'Submarine, sir'; I was mad about submarines. At our free-reading time he found me reading the Army handbook on the Lewis machine-gun, or rather looking at the diagrams explaining trajectories, though I also had Longfellow's Golden Legend which my mother must have put in my bag.



## HOME

I don't remember that we had any other poetry at home, though we did have Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare, a prize Mum had won, and a dozen other books including A.C. Benson's Lord of the Skies given by Dad's boss. Mum often recited verses by heart, especially a piece from Longfellow about 'Robert of Sicily, brother of Pope Urbain and Valmund, Emperor of Allemain', and 'The quality of mercy is not strained', which she remembered from performing in *The Merchant of Venice* at a club for young women in Bethnal Green. She wanted to see me do well at school, having been offered by a wealthy relative the chance of a place at St Paul's School for Girls, which she turned down because she would have had to be a boarder. Dad was good about such things too, but wasn't interested in literature, let alone poetry. I liked best curling up while he told stories of what he had done at school, especially when boys got into trouble and were beaten. He had grown up in a fire station, or rather several, and had memories of my Grandad jumping out of bed and sliding down the metal pole that went through the floor, and of Grandad jumping on to the back of the engine, doing up his jacket, as the horses pawed up, rearing at the doors and the doors flung open and they all dashed down the road ringing the bell and shouting 'Hi-yi, Fire! Fire! Clear the way!' and boys ran alongside cheering till they dropped behind, exhausted. Dad's own job was less exciting, mostly weighing parcels, collecting letters and ensuring they had the right postage stamps. But it was a great thing to be allowed to go to the end of the road on a summer's evening and wait till his tram arrived. One tram after another would sway up the incline, like galleons heeling over to the breeze I thought, and it would seem an age till Dad stepped off one of them. Then I had his newspaper to carry home, walking beside him, proud as Punch.



*Ron ca 1922*



*Ron with his father*

Mum gave me lunch every day of the week. I had seventy minutes, at the secondary school, and a good twenty minutes' walk each way; there was no dallying. She gave me fish because it was good for my brains, and a whacking big breakfast, porridge, egg and bacon, fried bread, bread and marmalade, tea, to get me off to a good start. But how I must have tied her down. Not that she had many other things to do. She used the sewing-machine a lot, maybe to make money, and when I was small let me work the treadle so that I could watch the 'little man' formed by the connecting rods, performing his gymnastics. She had several women friends, whom I saw when there were birthday parties. But there were seldom any visitors, even Auntie Flo and Uncle Archie, who were not my real uncle and aunt, came rarely. When they did, I was sent to wake them by standing outside their bedroom door and singing 'It's the soldiers of the Queen, my lads (who've seen my lads, who've been my lads, in the fight for England's glory, lads, of her world-wide glory let us sing).' This was after the time when I shared the same bedroom with Mum and Dad, tumbling over the top rail of my cot into their bed with 'Over the top with the best of luck', words really meant to encourage men leaving their trenches for an assault on the enemy lines. Identifying myself with soldiers seemed natural.

I loved the stories of war in the London Evening News, especially the comic reminiscences. Dad had been a civilian all through from 1914 to 1918, being classed C3 because he had had his appendix out. Once or twice I saw the little brown scar by his hip when he took his vest off. He taught me that D.R.G.M. printed on goods manufactured in Germany meant 'Damn rotten German made', and to sing 'Over land or sea, wherever you be, keep your eyes on Germanee'. I ask myself how much of my inability to appreciate much German literature is due to that and similar impressions, and how much Francophobia to another song that ended 'Viens c'est pour fêter la victoire de Joffre, Foch et Clémenceau'.

But Dad knew little French, and I'm not at all sure where I first heard that one. Altogether I was brought up quite a conservative, listening to Dad denouncing Bernard Shaw for what the papers said he was, and slating the Communist M.P. for Battersea North, Saklatvala, a name he would pronounce with distaste. Yet we weren't well off, living in an upstairs flat over a milkman, with a railway guard next door on one side and an insurance clerk the other, in a street that became 'common' with Irish and Italians halfway along. And though I didn't know it at the time, Mum had been turned out of her father's tied house when he died - he was a school caretaker in Bethnal Green, a poor quarter of London, - and put on the street with her mother, her sister and her brother, along with their furniture. They had all taken refuge among the looms at Spitalfields, where a friend worked. This must have been in the 1890s. Even when Dad was out of work for some weeks after the Wall Street crash of 1929, we stayed lower middle-class, never working-class. I never had any working-class friends except Gillwater, a big Jew who used to protect me in Wix's Lane playground.

And yet again our flat was cosy as any coalminer's. We lived all the time in the kitchen on the first floor, with a black open grate and kettle on the hob, gaslights with frilly glass shades on either side of the mantelpiece, a smelly sink inside a tall cupboard, the sewing-machine, a chest of drawers with the wireless on top, exchanged for five hundred Summit cigarette coupons, a drop-side table, a dresser. It was always warm, and as there was no hot water tap in the bath on the next floor we used a boat-shaped bath of galvanised iron in front of the fire, though everyone except the one having a bath had to go to bed early on bath nights. The stairs to the bathroom were steep. I charged up and down them to the tune of Suppé's Light Cavalry played on our clockwork gramophone, trotting gaily, galloping in the charge, falling tragically as the sad bits came on, finally cantering home full of glory, lance trailing.

After Sylvia was born, when I was nearly seven, I slept in what must have once been the maid's room at the top of the stairs. The domestic bells still hung on the wall in the downstairs flat, from the time when the house was occupied by one family with a servant. I

could lean out of the window on the second floor looking out over the wide gardens that had once been an orchard. The orchard wall ran midway between us and the houses in the next street, but the people over there had nine-tenths of the space, coming through to their second gardens through doors in the wall, while we had just about enough room to hang out a few clothes. But to spend a spring evening looking out from high up over all the apple and pear blossom was as pleasing as if we had owned it all. I would see girls having parties they thought were private, or sometimes Mr Sidey would come through the wall, shout up to our window, and offer some Williams pears.

The milkman's wife died, and he married through an agency a Polish woman, to look after his twin boys. I never had any games with them, scarcely saw them; I sensed they were the wrong class. But Mum took pity on the pasty-faced son of the Polish woman, a small pudding-headed boy who was not allowed ever to leave the house. We would hear her shouting 'Freddie!! Where are you? Come here! I cut your fingers off!' Or we would hear him in the dark at the foot of our stairs, mimicking his father's funeral. 'Bring the coffin along here. Don't bump it against the corner then.' Mum got permission for him to come up into our sunny kitchen with its view of the pear-tree, even to go with her and sit on the Common at the end of the road. But he was fearful all the time. 'I think I got to go now. I think I'm going to do a cushy ... I done a cushy', and Mum would have to mop up.

Mum really cared about my health. She would rub my chest with camphor oil when I had a cold, her hand calloused and rough. In the London fogs, which seemed almost like total darkness, she gave me Formamints to suck on the way to school. Every Friday I drank liquorice powder in water, with a green scum on the top which I disliked so much I was allowed senna pods instead. Children's bowels had to be cleansed once a week. I gargled with permanganate of potash which I was sent to buy at the chemists. You dropped the crystals in water and watched the purple-red smoke swirl upwards till the whole glassful was pinkish. These were all without packaging measured out by the shopkeeper or chemist, as required. No proprietary products except Gibbs dentifrice, which I liked because it was advertised with illustrations of romantic castles on high rocks, which were your teeth. I have good teeth still, thanks to Mum, who also took me to the dentist; he would ask after my goldfish, Nelson, and distract me by pressing a pedal and shooting me in the chair up to the ceiling, before bringing me down to work on my mouth. She asked the doctor to come when I had a temperature, which was suspected of being caused by diphtheria, a killer disease in those days. I spent six weeks in an isolation hospital, much less fun than at St Thomas's, where I went to have my tonsils out. There we lay head to foot, several boys to a bed, until a man leant over and offered me a balloon. 'Take a deep breath and blow into this, sonny'. As

it was full of chloroform I passed out. I was never in any other hospital, but had the usual run of mumps, German measles, measles, chickenpox, scarlet fever, 'flu, which I suppose every child had. When I became depressed at the prospect of going abroad at 17, we went to the doctor on Lavender Hill, who prescribed a bottle of medicine made up by himself in an outhouse. It had no effect.



*Ron's parents*

We always had a roast joint on Sunday, making possible 'dripping and toast' for tea, with a lot of salt. I made cookie-boys, dough with currants for eyes and buttons, and was the expert on Yorkshire puddings. Mum's fairy-cakes were very good. She would muse sometimes about how she would like to have a little restaurant in the country where she could serve her cakes. Mum and Dad drank almost no wine or beer. A bottle of port or of Australian Burgundy at Christmas was the most we ever had, and my 'Uncle' Fred, who used to drink beer in pubs, was a man who had to be forgiven a bit. Dad would sometimes

join him when we were on holiday at his home by the seaside, but not often. I don't remember drinking any alcohol until I was in the Army.

Dad would send me to the leather shop to buy a piece of leather the right size for the 'snobbing' he had in mind. The shop was hung with squares and rectangles of leather, so a lot of other fathers must have mended shoes too, using the same kind of metal foot for holding them in position. I don't remember him doing any other jobs. He would come home complaining 'My poor old plates' (of meat, rhyming slang for feet), after a day tramping everywhere in Esso headquarters where he was mailing clerk, and felt he deserved to rest them. He would read the Evening News, tell me a story, and sing some of the music-hall songs he remembered from before 1914. There were hundreds of them, which I still know by heart, and which my granddaughter Vanessa has learned from her father. 'Boiled Beef and Carrots' and 'I like Pickled Onions' are well-known, but Dad knew others, some of which told a story, like this miniature, sung to a jig:

Look at me now and the day you married me,  
 Look at the two black eyes you gave me,  
 Look at the fourpenny ring you bought me  
 - Touch me now, with the kid in me arms!

Or this one:

Down our street, there's a bloomin' riot  
 Four and twenty blokes are waiting there.  
 And the police, cannot keep em quiet,  
 For you know, they won't go, till they get me there –  
 Haha! Heehee! But that doesn't frighten me,  
 They'll have to wait till a horse drops dead  
 Or white hair grows on a black man's head,  
 Haha! Heehee! I'm not going there you see!  
 If anybody knows a thing or two, it's me, me, me, me me!

There were hymns too, many of which Dad heard as a boy at Moody and Sankey's missionary and temperance meetings: 'Pull for the shore, sailor' - the sailor being the alcohol addict, and shown on a magic lantern slide high above the congregation - 'leave the poor old stranded wreck, and PULL FOR THE SHORE'. Or triumphant Christian hymns: 'When the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there', 'Yes, yes, yes my Lord, I want to join that heavenly choir. Yes, yes, yes my Lord, I'm a soldier of the Cross', and a song about the flag of the dear old Army, meaning the Salvation Army. Dad very seldom went to church, but these were his form of worship.

On Saturday afternoons he would go to watch Chelsea, if they were playing at home, and sometimes take me too. He often went with Mr Lawlor from up the road, a stout Irishman

who would fling his hat high in the air if Chelsea scored, and never get it back. I knew that the only thing against Mr Lawlor, a jolly man, was that he was a Roman Catholic. I played with his two sons, Raymond and Brian, an interminable game of Football League, with cigarette cards or photos, pasted on card, of all the players in every team of the First Division. We would throw dice to decide which team had won, and kept our own league table according to our own results. But they were odd, Catholics, not quite right, and I distrusted the nuns who gave Christmas parties to which I was invited too. Despite all that, Mr Lawlor was Dad's friend. I would leave them standing together in the crowd, and slip through to the front at the foot of the slope, my nose just at the level of the coping, enjoying a worm's eye view of giants like Alex Jackson and Stanley Matthews. If I had stayed with the two fathers I would have seen nothing and been crushed into the bargain. The men were packed in so close they could roll a drunk down to the front over their heads, with no risk of him falling. 'Nother one coming', and there they would lie alongside me. But the crowd were well behaved, apart from a punch-up behind the stands some days. Many years later I took John to see the Spurs and was upset at the vicious shouting, the brutal partisanship. Yet I remember watching a game in Paris in 1937, hearing shouts of 'Tue-le! Casse ses bras!' Maybe I wasn't really aware enough as a boy.

I was very fond of both my parents, though as I grew up it was more and more difficult to make contact. Mum would say, when I was at university, how she would love to have a serious conversation with me, but she couldn't as I knew too much, now. But she would often recite bits of poetry to me, especially Shylock's plea for humanity. She knew a lot of tags, and would meet my illnesses with 'Never mind, worse troubles at sea', or make jokes about 'Toulouse and Toulon, like the sailor's trousers'. There were so many of these, if I could only remember them at this moment. On the wall of her bedroom was a text in Gothic, 'Trust in the Lord and wait patiently for Him', and a large picture of Christ walking on the water.

I must have learned from Mum to be a Sir Galahad, I've always had a touch of that. Coming home from Wix's Lane one afternoon I saw Ronnie Smith, a thin boy with a glass eye who lived across the road from us, bullying another boy. I ran up and jumped on Ronnie's back. He was so frightened at first he let the other boy run away. Then we sparred up to each other, circling in the middle of the road, as you could in those traffic-less days, but never landing a blow, scarcely even lunging. Quite a crowd collected, until a man walked over to us and said we'd fought long enough and could go home now. I got home dishevelled, and Mum went to complain to Ronnie Smith's mother, who called him

downstairs to the front door, seized a long willowy cane and flashed it round his bare legs as he fled upstairs again.

My Mum and Dad never hit me, though I relished hearing how Grandad would reach for the buckle of his belt and start undoing it if Dad or his brother Uncle Alf showed signs of mischief. In the same way I relished the school stories in the Magnet, especially the scenes where the fat Billy Bunter was made to bend over: 'Yaroooh! cried the Fat Owl of the Remove', and I luxuriated in his pain. Yet it all felt innocent, and after all I wasn't enjoying a real boy being caned. All the same there was as much pleasure in it as eating crumpets.

I had nightmares when I had to sleep in the upstairs room on my own. Mum let me creep in the double bed with her and Dad, which wasn't such a good idea. What with the cosy kitchen and warm bed I wasn't ready for my second holiday away from home. The first had been all right - a week away when I was six, to get me out of the way while Sylvia was being born. The second, with the same very close friend, Ken Attew, wasn't so good. (Ken died in the War, I heard, flying. I never saw him after this holiday when I was ten.)



*Ron and his sister Sylvia*

We had a fortnight in a village in the Fens, Ken and I and Ken's parents, staying with a vicar who terrified me. I might have been happier even though it was hard to sleep on my own with a petrol engine supplying electricity thumping for all the evening hours, in a big, dark house where everything was strange. But the vicar not only had a moustache-cup, and a moustache of a size to need such protection from the wet tea, but was epileptic, and would

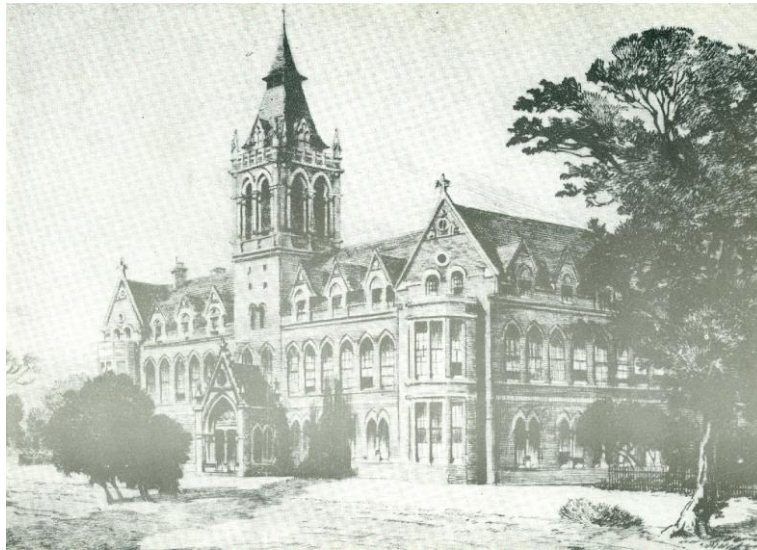


suddenly fall into a fit at the breakfast table. I probably did get over that before long, but the poor townee I was had other troubles. Driving in a gig down a rutted lane we went over a wasps' nest, and the wasp that flew into my face was crushed on my forehead when I banged the peak of my cap on him. The sting left a huge bruised ball. And then we went to see the harvest, where the men stood round the field with shotguns, killing the rabbits as they rushed out of the diminishing patch of uncut corn. I went to church, where I was allowed to pump the organ, since I was a choirboy at home, but the vicar had a fit in the pulpit. Standing at the foot of the tower as the wind blew clouds over it I was convinced the tower would fall on me. So although I enjoyed bowling for a pig on the vicarage lawn, and being taken to a place where the pub was 'Five Miles from Anywhere', and seeing Ely Cathedral come into view as we went round a curve in the vicar's old Ford, the holiday upset me for a long time to come. The trivial incidents took on a meaning out of all proportion to their importance as I see it now, and I had difficulty leaving home for years after. Joining the Boy Scouts in order to make myself able to conquer homesickness - I knew we would go camping - never had the effect I wanted, and the prospect of going to France at 17 produced huge butterflies in the stomach for months beforehand.



*Ron's sister Sylvia ('Sally') as a BBC reporter 1954*

## SCHOOL AGAIN



*Emanuel School*

I may have been unsettled too, by changing schools. I 'won a scholarship', in the equivalent of what was known later as 'the 11 + exam', and left Wix's Lane for a grammar school. It's true, all went well for a year. I enjoyed the first homework I ever had, learning 'amo, amas, amat', to be sung to the tune of The Grand Old Duke of York, and the French lessons, of which I remember little except the sentence 'Quand on n'a pas ce que l'on aime, il faut aimer ce que l'on a'. No lessons on how to buy a railway ticket in those days. But things went downhill for two reasons. First, we were taught in the second year by a number of masters whose nicknames corresponded more with the quality of their teaching than nicknames necessarily do. Potch, Old Nick, Bandy, Gag, Plug, were probably quite different outside the classroom. Inside, they provoked or consented to riot day after day. Second, as I went into higher classes I became aware that we were being groomed for future registration as boys of a public school, or at least of a school included in the Public Schools Yearbook. That had better effect, because I revolted.

My children, comparing their own schools, could scarcely believe my stories of what went on at Emanuel. Potch, so called because we competed in counting the drops of spittle sprayed on our exercise books when his wrath exploded, kept such poor discipline that I failed to understand any of the initial stages in mathematics. Old Nick, a clergyman whom we regarded as mad, spent much of our science lessons, or so it seems now, blowing into glass tubes while heating their ends in Bunsen burners, to make thermometer bulbs, and bursting them, for which we took the blame. He had a pair of earphones attached to a box on the desk, which boys would tap with a pencil. We could annoy him particularly by 'air raids'

in which the class hummed with closed lips, stamping the floor now and again to represent bombs. Plug had given up all hope of teaching us English. When he walked into the classroom paper darts flew round his head as he stalked to the blackboard and began writing in a copperplate hand the lesson we were supposed to copy into our books. When a joss stick was burned inside a desk he seized the whole desk, supposing a fire had started, and tipped its contents out of the window. I was regularly bottom in English all that second year, though I was probably not ill-behaved, merely bored and helpless. We had a variety of Latin masters until my fifteenth year: one would get through the lesson by setting tests to be answered in turn by each boy in a row, though few could answer correctly. We would deflect him from serious teaching by encouraging him to tell us gruesome stories from Greek myths, especially one about a man whose heart burst from drinking too much water. The following year was a climax. Dicky Dowler could no more keep order than Plug. When he entered, the desk-lids would all be raised so that when he ordered them to be closed they could be smashed down with a bang. Or he would be greeted with a chorus of Volga boatmen. We had him on toast, and I don't think I ever felt sorry for him at the time. After some months it was we who were on toast. Preparing for another three quarters of an hour of inventive chaos we saw a whirling shadow behind the frosted glass of the door and knew at once it was the Old Man. Why he had allowed us to go on for so long is beyond guessing. The other masters may have concealed their knowledge - their classrooms were divided only by partitions in what had been a dormitory - out of sympathy for Dowler, who retired with a nervous breakdown. At all events, we now had to pay for our japes. The sentence he set for translation was 'The pig is so fat that he can scarcely move'. Somebody managed 'porcus'. 'Tam pinguis' had to be supplied by the Old Man but 'vix posset', volunteered by some genius, for the rest of us were completely ignorant, as well as cowed, produced a shriek I can still hear. 'Possit!!!'. The next year we had a kindly man specially imported from Manchester Grammar, who kept us in after hours while we filed up and recited in his ear all the verbs of all four conjugations in Kennedy's Latin Primer, from present indicative to gerundive. He also dictated his own translation of the set book, Aeneid II, so that we could learn it by heart and reproduce it when confronted with a passage for translation in the Matriculation exam. It was no use. I failed completely in Latin, a sad collapse for a linguist.

The Old Man was worried not only because of the prospect of a whole class failing in Latin, a subject still necessary at that time for boys going to university. The school needed a good reputation in every field if he was to stand a chance of joining the Head Masters' Conference, which would mean we could call ourselves a public school, and the trouble was, half the boys were paid for by their parents, while the rest, like me, were paid for by the London County Council. The Council was, you might say, subsidising the fee-payers, but the

school ran as though the Council boys were the oddities who had to be forced into conformity. 'You're all right', one of the fee-payers said to me, 'and so are x and y' - two other scholarship entrants - 'but Bird, and Fletcher ...' and he went on to reel off a list of dislikes that could have been matched from his own side of the fence, if I had thought of doing that. Another boy whose fees were paid by Father put the whole thing neatly when somebody speculated on why our First XV played only the Second XV of Mill Hill, the public school in North London, 'Well, it's like this. Mill Hill are here' - slicing the air horizontally - 'and we are here' - slicing again several inches lower. 'Battersea Grammar are here' - much lower slice - 'and Sir Walter St John's are here' - nearly at knee-level. The Old Man had to meet that situation. He would begin an address at morning assembly in moderate tones, until he reached the recollection of what his wife had seen from the Headmaster's house: boys coming up the drive wearing school caps and eating ice-creams, for instance, and here his voice would shriek to a stop, as though his vocal cords had joined together and stifled him. He instituted classes to improve our accents, at which we would recite in chorus 'The brown cow bounded down the mound', making the 'ow's' sound like 'aa-oo', rather than 'ah'. There were also uniform dress inspections, needed not so much because it was not obvious whether we were wearing black vicuna jackets, grey flannel trousers, white shirts and school ties, but because we might have bought our clothes not at Harrods but at a shop near Clapham Junction. To find out whether we had, we had the collar of our jackets pulled back so that the shop-label could be read. We were allowed to keep our trousers on.

There were good men on the staff. Owen Ginn picked me out almost as soon as he came, as a boy for Oxford or Cambridge, and no doubt the Head was replacing the old duds with people like him as fast as he could. There were Cyril Bond and Mr Canfield, whose first name I didn't know, both a great help with German, and Leslie Hunt for history - not until the Sixth - and Hanks for physics. It was Hanks who taught me a mnemonic for trigonometry: sin, cos and tan are still in my head as 'Poor Hanks, Bald Head, Poor Bloke', where 'P' is for perpendicular, 'B' for base, and 'H' for hypotenuse. And there were affable professionals like Welsh Jones the historian, who would break off a well-conducted lesson, out of boredom, I expect, with 'Gorblimey boys, who won the war?' We knew we had to answer 'You did, sir!' and that he would probably make one of us come out to the front and tell the others how. Charlie Hill, Major Hill of the Officers' Training Corps, was just as lively. We spent a lot of time on map reading, and on ten-question tests that would usually begin 'What colour tie am I wearing today?', the tie being by that time covered with his hand. 'You're a fool boy, arnchew!' was one of his stock methods of keeping order. You had to agree, you were. They all taught me no end of things that I don't remember, and some that I still do. I owe them a lot. But they give no sense of what the school still feels like, sixty or seventy years later.

None of us were homosexuals, that I know of. Some of us explored each other's short trousers during lessons, with astonishing results that we repeated privately at holiday parties in each others' homes. Perhaps I am wrong, though. The gym master who walloped us with a leather end of a climbing rope or a plimsoll was sacked for some sexual misbehaviour with a boy. A history master who invited me to share his bed when I dropped in on the old school while it was evacuated to Hampshire startled me into uncontrollable shivers, though I never suspected him while I was a boy, or even knew what to expect. A classics master did call me out to the front while the class had their heads down, writing, and pushed his hand down between my belt and the seat of my trousers. I must have been petrified, but he never made any other advances, though I must have been quite a temptation. For some months a tea-merchant with a hut at the back of the Clapham Junction station took me to tea-tastings near Tower Bridge, to the cinema and to saucy shows at the Chelsea Palace, until my father told me I was not to go out with him anymore. I knew nothing about homosexuals, who were never in the news then, and so came out of all that still innocent.

The gym master was no worse than the prefects, so far as beatings went. You were caned, whether by prefects or masters, in the bathroom where the space between the rows of baths, a relic of days when the school had boarders, gave room for a long run-up. Boys would gather outside the bathroom door to commiserate with the unlucky ones. I was never caned myself. On the rare occasions when I might just have been I lied my way out of it, and the frequency of canings shot down rapidly when the Old Man discovered that the prefects had painted on the end-wall of the corridor where they had their study-rooms a Roll of Blood. This contained the names of boys caned by each prefect in the current term, and was the basis of a competition. Prefects were not allowed to cane after that discovery, only to impose fifty or a hundred or five hundred lines, repetitions of some sentence beginning 'I must not'.

Masters continued to come, and so did the Old Man. We were given a demonstration of what this meant when a boy, who had pulled out his penis and waggled it in full view of the class, had his sin visited on him in our presence. Right hand first, and he doubled up. Left hand. Right hand. Left hand. Right hand. Left hand. It made no difference except that he never waggled his penis to us again. He and boys like him were as unruly as ever. Caning had no effect, so far as discipline in class was concerned. Only the boys not inclined to make trouble were troubled.

I was never a prefect, for reasons unconnected with caning. At fourteen or thereabouts I joined the O.T.C., Charlie Hill's outfit, as we all had to, and spent hours on Tuesday afternoons drilling in the playground. We had a speciality: 'Squad will move to the

right in diagonal march, right in---cline', at which command we kicked the middle of one boot with the toecap of the other and moved in diamond formation ignoring commands till we could say we were out of earshot and could ostentatiously mark time facing the wall. We also learned about the Lewis machine-gun, my second acquaintance with the out-of-date weapon, and did a lot more map-reading. Once or twice a year we went to Epsom Downs for a Field Day, for preference sitting in the ferns rattling a football rattle to represent gunfire, and waiting for an umpire to arrive and tell us we had been blown up. It was great fun on a sunny day, though real war was only three years away, and we marched in columns back to the buses singing rigger club songs.

There was a king, and a bastard king, who lived long years ago.  
 He ruled the land with an iron hand, and his ways were mean and low.  
 Chorus: He was dirty and lousy and full of fleas  
 And his old John Thomas hung down to his knees,  
 So balls to the bastard King of England.

But I hadn't liked the Corps from the outset. My Uncle Will was a pacifist, and when I heard about Passchendaele and the Somme I wanted to be a pacifist too. I wrote a poem beginning 'Sing, Caedmon! What shall I sing?', words my mother had taught me, surprisingly, since they came from an Anglo-Saxon poem, and what I was told to sing was a Walt Whitmanesque verse-essay against war. That was turned down by the master who edited the school magazine as 'too personal'. I read a bit about Gandhi's non-violent tactics and thought I might be hero enough to try them, if the test ever came. But it was a dilettante thought, and what spurred me to action was not the thought of more trench warfare but an accident. On the morning of a Field Day I had wound my itchy puttees carefully round my legs, making each overlap exactly the same size as all the rest, which always took some time, winding and unwinding. It was past the time when I could walk to school, and getting near the time when I would have to run for the bus at the end of our road. My bootlace broke as I was tying it up, and that did it. I was not going on the Field Day. I would stay at home and tell them tomorrow I was a pacifist.

That meant I had to become one. Hanks with his bald head was sympathetic but told me he didn't agree. Charlie Hill huffed and puffed in a friendly way. But the Old Man was angry. He called me to his study, asked me my reasons, which I told him, not mentioning the bootlace, and he dismissed me with words that rang in my head as I walked round the playing field for half an hour, unwilling to go back to the classroom. 'Your attitude savours of the soil' - then, maybe remembering that sons of the soil were a good thing, added 'and not very good soil either'. I was an L.C.C. boy after all, shown up in my true colours.

I was diddled, a few weeks later. Surely, they said, I didn't want to cut myself off completely. As a Boy Scout, I knew a lot about map-reading: wouldn't I like to take a class of the junior boys in a subject that need have no military implications at all? So I agreed, and enjoyed it, until near the end of the school year when the Annual Parade was in the offing, they said wouldn't I put on my uniform just for this one day so that the Corps could display its full numbers. Then I realised that I hadn't been taken off the books, the record was unchanged so far as the Headmasters' Conference and registration as a public school was concerned. But it stood me in no good stead. The Old Man called me in from time to time to see if I had changed my mind: if I had, I could be a prefect and stop wearing the schoolboy cap, and not be kept in detention for arriving a few minutes late. I went on wearing the cap, instead of a prefect's trilby, till I was nearly 19, but that was trivial, nothing in comparison with the resentment I felt for a long time at the Old Man's insult to me and my parents.

I was diddled in another way, for although I won an open scholarship to Cambridge and needed no more qualification than that (apart from the Latin 'Little-Go' exam, which was a farce) I was persuaded to stay on and take three subjects for the 'Higher School Certificate', adding more lustre to the school's name. I would have done better seeing a bit of the world outside. Between December 1937 and July 1938 I had plenty of free time for all that. I had joined the Peace Pledge Union, solemnly promising never to fight in a war, and was enthusiastic about 'Dick' Sheppard and George Lansbury, Gandhi, and a book called *The Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War*, by Trotter. At weekends I stood at street-corners near the Junction, selling *Peace News*, and even joining the cranks on Clapham Common Speakers' Ground and other South London commons, where I shouted so loud that a policeman once asked me to 'tone it down, so that people could hear what the other speakers were saying'. A particular incident still impresses me. After I had come down off my platform two men slightly older than I was came up to me and asked some sensible questions about what I would do in various circumstances - not including the possible rape of my sister. They said they were members of the Territorial Army. But they were not hostile or aggressive, merely looking at what I had said in a rational way. If only the Old Man had been like them.

## FRANCE AND GERMANY

By this time I felt decidedly on the left in politics, though without passion. Our Sixth Form lessons in economics, taken by the out-of-line English master 'Dolly' Mearns (a man) and based on Bernard Shaw's *Intelligent Woman's Guide ...*, led me to suppose there was no intelligent alternative to socialism. I read the *New Statesman*, Left Wing Book Club books, but without any experience of what factory life was like and, although our P.P.U. committee meetings were beyond the railway lines in 'Communist' Battersea, I never tried to find out how people lived there. That was one result of being an 'almost' public school. I always felt an aloof observer, as I did when I went to France in 1937 on a three-month scholarship awarded by the L.C.C. Almost the first thing I did was to go to the Communist Party headquarters in the XIVth arrondissement and ask what they were doing. 'Join us in the Bastille Day parade', they said, so I did, shouting with the rest 'Du travail pour les jeunes, une retraite pour les vieux'. But though everyone was very friendly that was as far as I got. After all, I was off to Tours a fortnight later, where I met Pat, and got into arguments with her boyfriend Jean Peaudecerf, a sergeant in the French Army. I never thought I would have to defend myself as an Englishman for my share of responsibility in the execution of Joan of Arc, but Jean belonged to Parti Social Francais, - quite a Fascist, and national fervour was in his blood. He was decent to me, though, when he found out I was a Rover Scout, as he was himself. Though I was flabby by any standards, I enjoyed paddling down the Loire in a two-man canoe with him and his Army friends, camping, and emulating them in pouring wine down my throat from the skin bag held high over my head - as we wore only shorts it didn't matter if we missed. With Pat I stayed on distant terms, though not realising how she felt about Jean. One of my first thoughts was that I wouldn't want to marry her, to which she might have said 'Nobody asked you!'.



*Ron in Paris 1937*



A similar scholarship in Germany in 1938 did more to change my ideas. I had heard from Owen Ginn four years earlier what was happening there, when he called a meeting of parents and boys to tell us what he had just seen on a short visit. We had all been puzzled by a German schoolboy quartet which performed in our school hall what I now realise was Haydn's Emperor Quartet, but which seemed then to be endless repetitions of Deutschland Über Alles, the musical subject of its slow movement. It had been a continual question, what I as a pacifist would do if I was confronted by Nazi violence, and my answer was always that I would need the discipline shown by some Sikhs I had read about, who stood stock still while the police cracked down on them with lathis. What I myself actually saw in Germany did very little to persuade me otherwise: dictatorships then were not what they became later. Sitting in my railway compartment at the frontier near Cologne I had a slight fear that the customs official would open my bag and discover Edgar Mowrer's *Germany Puts the Clock Back*, in its orange Penguin cover, but he was satisfied with a look at my passport, with its impressive request by Anthony Eden that as a British subject I should be given every assistance. That passport in my pocket was always a comfort. I could walk past the sentries standing by the monument to the Nazis killed in Hitler's early Munich putsch without giving the Hitler salute, and never be challenged. (My sports jacket and flannel trousers probably said plainly enough where I came from.) I was free, too, to laugh with all the other foreigners learning German at the Deutsche Akademie, when we had our weekly hour of indoctrination. I admired specially a tall Norwegian who would tie in knots our indoctrinator, Herr Nietschke, when he launched into some topic such as birth control (why did Hitler not approve of it, the Norwegian would ask, when it would help to solve his problems of overpopulation); I learned much later that this same man had been shot as a member of the Resistance. We laughed at the Romanian girls who swore they had heard people near the National Theatre crying out 'Hunger! Brot!', when we afterwards heard the chorus singing these words in Strauss's opera *Friedensfeier*. But I was naively disappointed when I tried to amuse my hosts the Filser, with tales of our amusements. They were not prepared, as I realised after a while, to express any sympathy which I might later mention in gossiping with somebody else. The nearest they came to showing their opinions was when they took me to see the decorations for the 'Day of German Art', and demanded to see what I had written about them in my notebook. It was actually 'panem circensesque', of which I was rather proud. And Herr Filser, a round-headed, bald but black-moustached publisher, who never knew what to say to me when he had his morning 'Schoppen', except 'Jojojoho! Sosososo!', grunted approval, and Frau Filser, English by birth, though married in 1914, showed she agreed too. Yet when I asked what was happening in Dachau, not far from where we were, she would give only the stock answer: it was for the education of people who did not understand what the Movement really

stood for. She was embarrassed too when I asked why people I had seen on the street wore yellow arm-bands with three black spots. She knew I thought they were Jews, though in fact the armbands were meant to show they were blind. I saw no Jews, so far as I was aware, though some shops had notices reading 'Juden nicht erwünscht' (Jews not wanted). The only opposition I ever heard was in an open-air swimming bath, where a man who knew I was English said 'It's the muzzle here, you know'. Yet when I walked along the Nordkette above Innsbruck wearing my Rover Scout uniform - minus badges, which Scout H.Q. had advised me to remove - people replied in kind when I challengingly said 'Grüss Gott' instead of 'Heil Hitler!'

Hitler's flat in Munich was on the further side of the gardens opposite the flat where the Filser lived. The striped awning was always drawn, so that I never saw in, but I did see him drinking some beverage on a balcony by the House of German Art, with a great crowd looking on, separated from him by only fifty or sixty yards. Later, I saw him in an open car, following a procession. There, was a crowd all round me, and as he drew nearer the arms started to go up in a Hitler salute. I had not expected this, and for a moment thought of not joining it. But though I felt no fear, and would certainly not have suffered if I had refused, I am ashamed to say my arm went up with the rest. This is a bitter memory. I don't know why I did it, I simply became part of a general impulse.

After a couple of months in Munich I went for a final month to Frankfurt, where I was au pair in the house of the widow of a university professor, Frau Wülker. It was while I was living with her that I experienced the kind of pressures felt by ordinary citizens without a foreign passport to protect them. I wanted to hire a bicycle, so Hans Wülker, a lad of twelve or thirteen in the Hitler Youth, went with me to shop where bikes were on hire. The shop man looked at me oddly when I said what I wanted, and simply replied 'Where do you come from?' Not knowing what he meant I said 'Munich', as this was the last place I had been living in. 'That's why' ('Darum'), he said, and arranged the hire without more comment. Outside I asked Hans what all that had been about. 'He's the district leader' he said - 'and you didn't say "Heil Hitler" when you went in. And as your German sounds good he thought you really did come from Munich, where people are supposed to be lackadaisical about such things'. Nothing more happened - except that I had my first experience of a backpedalling brake when I tried to freewheel downhill, and stopped for no reason that I could fathom. But if I had really been a lukewarm visitor from Munich I would have seen the red light, and so would anyone else who forgot his manners in that particular shop. There must have been thousands like it, all over Germany, keeping people on the right tracks.

Yet this did not explain why Frau Wülker engaged me in conversation every morning after breakfast, expounding Nazi philosophy and Nazi points of view. She was plump and friendly, slightly eccentric in requiring me and her children to drink 'Heilerde', a remedy against an epidemic of infantine paralysis that tasted like gritty coffee grounds, and was to be drunk with coffee. She took me to a restaurant after carefully explaining the difference between 'Apfelwein', a kind of cider, and 'Apfelsaft', mere juice, and was disappointed enough, when in sheer forgetfulness I made the wrong choice, to say 'Apfelwein, Herr Ober! Der junge Herr trinkt Alkohol!' She pooh-poohed my pacifism, calling me a 'schlaffer Engländer', not only for that, but for my habit of leaning against her mantelpiece. But she was not obliged to defend tooth and nail every single thing Hitler said or did. I could still smile at Nazi effrontery when I came back from an exhibition of the party's achievements in building houses for workers and told her I had seen a government placard saying 'Any idiot can rule with a rubber truncheon'. But after I had stood waiting in a bus shelter where all the walls had been pasted with sheets of the nauseous anti-Jewish periodical *Der Stürmer*, I felt she would have to give in. The caricature of a hook nosed Jew shitting money into a piggy-bank was not the nastiest feature. But Frau Wülker was not giving in. Perhaps she could no more afford to than the Filsers could run the risk of my passing on any remarks they made. At all events she replied that she would not attack Jews in the way *Der Stürmer* did, and yet that was the only way you could get ordinary people to see the truth.

By September the German newspapers were running headlines on the front page, underlined in red, about Germans in Czechoslovakia being beaten up by Czechs. I don't suppose I believed them, but I didn't see them as symptoms of war-fever either. In England it was different. My parents wrote one letter after another urging me to come home, and finally my father asked me to ring him at work. When I did he told me a war was going to break out at any minute so, although I still had a couple of weeks before I was due back, I packed my bags and took a steamer up the Rhine. The atmosphere on board was very friendly. When people discovered I was English they told me over and over again that they didn't want a war, there wouldn't be one, Germans and English were friends, and I was sure they meant it. How enthusiastic they were about the invasion of Poland a year later there is no knowing. By all accounts, I heard, it was extremely popular.

Some months after I had arrived home and Chamberlain had signed the Munich Agreement, handing the ethnic German parts of Czechoslovakia to Germany, I had a letter from Frau Wülker. She had a Jewish friend who would be allowed to leave Germany if a sponsor could be found abroad, prepared to put down £50 on his behalf. I think, at least, that was the proposition. When my father was earning less than £4 a week this was a fantastically large sum and I did not even try to raise it, though if I had known where to ask

and had been pertinacious I might have found enough. The odd thing was that Frau Wülker wrote at all. I was reminded of her later when I read a speech of Himmler to the SS generals, saying that of course they all knew one particular Jew whom they liked, and how essential it was to kill the 'Schweinehund' of pity within. I never made contact either with her or with the Filsers after the war, though I wrote to the old addresses. Nor did I hear from the two German prisoners who were allowed to have Sunday tea with Pat and me at home in Cambridge in 1946, except for an anti-capitalist denunciation from the one who went back to East Germany. No contact remains from that period of eight years beginning in 1938.

## UNIVERSITY

At Cologne railway station on the way home I met for the first time Ellis Owen, who was to occupy the room next to mine at Emmanuel College for the next eight months. He had a good singing voice; it was from him that I first heard 'Die Rose, die Lilie, die Taube, die Sonne', and I envied his fluent colloquial German. Months later I hit him on the waistcoat button hard enough to break a bone in my little finger, which is still partly bent. But that was a sign of friendship. Both he and I and all the College scholars and exhibitioners, together with the State Scholars, who had grants for which they were qualified by very high grades in the Higher School Certificate examinations, were grouped in one or two staircases, where we instituted the Tortoise Club, reading papers on a variety of topics to each other, in the presence of a tortoise that inhabited the sunken lawn in North Court. (We had to substitute a brass tortoise when our purloining of college property was discovered.) I assumed at the time that we were grouped in this way because we were an intellectual lot, and would prefer it. It never struck me that it might be for social reasons, and I don't think even now that it was. We mixed with the presumably wealthier undergraduates without self-consciousness - and some of the non-scholars, the 'commoners', may well have had less to spend than we had ourselves. I have read accounts of working-class and lower middle-class boys being snobbishly treated both at Oxford and at other Cambridge colleges, but there was never a breath of it at Emmanuel. It's true, I had visiting cards printed, with my name and both my college and my home address printed on them, having been told it was the 'done' thing. But there was very little 'leaving of cards', such as there had been in earlier times when aristocratic visitors went the rounds of their acquaintance. Some men could afford to have breakfast carried to their rooms on a porter's head, covered with a silver dome, whereas I had cornflakes, milk and tea. But my own rooms were astonishingly large: a study, with desk, two armchairs and a sofa, an enormous bedroom which I rigged up with a string running along the picture rail so that I could switch the light on and off without losing my way in the dark, a small entrance hall and a 'gyp-room' or kitchen with cupboard, gas-ring and sink. I learned to put my shoes outside the front door to be polished every morning, as was the custom then in hotels, and I tipped my bedmaker, a lady with a black straw hat pinned to her hair, and a bosomy starched white apron, more than I could really afford but as much as I was told she could expect. All I lacked was a bath and a lavatory, for which I had to go down six flights of stairs and cross the open court for about two hundred yards.

Having to have dinner in Hall five nights a week - your name was ticked by the head porter, and more than two absences a week meant giving an explanation to your Tutor - ensured meeting old friends and making new ones, as no places were reserved. On my two nights off I went to the Blue Barn, a ramshackle two-storey building where the multi-storey

car-park opposite where the Union Society now is, and stuffed myself with Chop Suey and Chow Mein for 6d a time. I stuffed myself equally at Hall dinner, as there was little money left over for lunch. That would often be a herring, costing 1½d and poached on a plate over a saucepan of water. Porridge was ruled out by my bedmaker, who refused to wash the saucepan afterwards. I went in some awe of her. No money for beer or cigarettes, though I accepted the free one at Debating Society meetings, where we also passed round a tin of humbugs, supposed to be symbolical of ourselves.

I forget what the debates were about. They were mainly an occasion for showing off and tripping up one's friends with points of order, though we observed great ceremony: the President, Leo Greenwood, Fellow in Classics, would lead the undergraduate Vice-President and Secretary in procession to a table where they donned their robes of office and the Secretary sharpened his quill, checked the sand he used instead of blotting paper, and we would all relax into comfortable leather armchairs. Two members who were members of the British Union of Fascists would try to persuade us, when newspapers for the year were being chosen, to subscribe to their paper, Action. That was a great occasion for displaying our wit. But meeting in each other's rooms we became more solemn. Nobody believed Chamberlain had won 'peace with honour' at Munich. A war with Germany before very long seemed inevitable. The 'Kristallnacht' of November 1938 when Jewish shop windows were smashed throughout most of Germany, was ominous. After the occupation of the Ruhr, the invasion of Austria, the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the broadcasts of Hitler's speeches on BBC news, punctuated by barbaric shouts of 'Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!' made the possibility of passive resistance much more questionable than it had seemed. A few of us held out, supported by a Fellow, Alex Wood, a Labour candidate for Parliament who was one of the leading men of the P.P.U. and held meetings in his rooms, two staircases from ours.

But though I went on a protest march down Regent Street behind Sheppard and Lansbury I knew I was giving way. We had never argued at school, where I was, so I thought, an oddball and nothing else. At Emmanuel we had all night to talk if we wanted to, and we did. By the time war was declared I had changed my mind, though it was not quite so rational as that sounds.

I was more rational, at least for some twenty years to come, so far as religion was concerned. From the time when I was 13 or 14 I had been put off the English Church by Sunday School teachers whom I heard every Sunday, although I enjoyed singing in the choir every Sunday morning and evening, until my voice broke. The breaking voice may have been the spur to breaking away completely. For a while I would sit at the back of the church out of habit, though also because I still wanted to belong. But my mother could give me no answer when I asked how you could tell Christianity was true, rather than Hinduism or

Buddhism, and the Sunday School - extremely well attended - was merely prim and proper. A simple Simon story about how our teacher had as a boy stolen jam from his mother's cupboard was the last straw. I gave up going, although Scouts' Church parades still kept me in touch, just as O.T.C. map-reading lessons made sure I was still on the books. I was still caught in institutional fly-paper.

When I went to Germany I attended Church services only to hear a Haydn or a Mozart Mass - I was reprimanded by a peasant, who must have thought I was in the Hitler Youth or the Labour Corps, for standing with my hands behind my back instead of, respectfully, clasped in front. In my first weeks at Emmanuel, however, I was invited to tea with several other freshmen, and suddenly invited to slip off my chair on to my knees. This was a trick of the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, CICCU for short ('Cambridge University' would have resulted in CUCU), a trick still being played in 1989, when CICCU seemed as strong as it had ever been. I had no regard for them, or for the 'moderate' Students' Christian Union. Yet I was impressed with religion in some form or another, and have been all my life, even against my will and better judgment. When I first heard at lectures of the mystic Jakob Boehme, who influenced William Blake so strongly, I made a promise to myself that one day I would study him in real detail. For the time being I contented myself with staring hard at the wall, or maybe at a polished surface like the one in which he was supposed to have seen a vision caused by the reflected sun. I saw nothing, but found myself reading Boehme as part of the work for my Ph.D. ten years later, when I had forgotten almost completely my earlier interest. My experiences in 1954 while writing about Kafka, which I hope to describe later, were connected with the same interest, and so also, to my even greater surprise, was my concern with Shakespeare's Sonnets, which occupied me from my retirement at the age of 62 onwards. But I never had any visions or any mystical experience.

This interest in Boehme was one of the few seeds of my undergraduate years that bore fruit. I remember nothing that matters from the lectures on literature I attended, which were biographical and historical but never critical - except for a remark by a lecturer who told us the poetry of Rimbaud was like raspberry jam essence, without the raspberry jam. The language work, a translation from and into German and French each week, with corresponding classes, making about fourteen hours a week, was a grind, though we felt it justified us in comparison with people reading English, for whom reading was everything. But the passages would be set from Dickens and J.G. Frazer, H.G. Wells and Bernard Shaw, who wrote in a style of which we had no experience in our foreign languages, and little in our own. I remember with gratitude Roy Pascal, who showed me how much two published translations of Rilke differed from each other and from the original poem. That was one of

my first striking introductions to the subtleties of language and of criticism. Still more impressive, though I feared him, was Lewis Harmer, who set me a passage for translation into French each week as part of a college supervision, additional to the university classes - and went through my version with a wire brush. He taught no literature: all his French novels looked like those children's books in which the top, the middle and the bottom of a figure can be rearranged to produce absurd results, a sea captain with ladies' corsets and footballer's legs and so on. He would snip out any sentences that interested him, paste them on a card, and put them in his card-index in preparation for his work on French grammar. 'Ah yes', he would say, with a glint and a smile, 'I see you used the subjunctive there, Gray'. Out would come his pencil, which he dropped upright into the box to mark where he had taken out for my benefit a handful of cards. 'I do in fact have here one author who uses the subjunctive in similar circumstances. But I have four, seven, ten, twelve who do not.' He would not say I was wrong, and I felt pleased about that one author who was on my side, though I knew he shouldn't have been. At Harmer's lectures he inveighed against French authors who would not observe the rules of their own language. But he taught me what a rule really meant, and sometimes even admitted that a rule might change. It was better than having a red cross against my mistakes, without comment.

On the German side Harold Knight's potted German history and philosophy were popular. He was clear and witty, and you felt you were getting somewhere, though he was guilty later of setting an exam question that read 'Herder: a brilliant thinker, but fundamentally unsound'. That kind of clubman's attitude was ingrained in him, and I never learned from him to think about either subject. Far more fascinating was a refugee from Heidegger's department of philosophy at Freiburg, Werner Brock, a victim of Heidegger's notorious pro-Nazi behaviour. Brock did not know his German as Harmer knew French. 'Ja, das sass irgendwie nicht', he would say apologetically about some mistake of mine - 'That didn't somehow go'. But he was passionate about German history. His gentle face had puffed eyes that made him appear to have been weeping all night, when he took up his position at the rostrum with a tall pointer intended for indicating places on the map above his head, but looking more like the lance of a knight about to do battle. He would bang it on the floor to emphasise his point that Germany had had only fourteen years of genuine democracy in the whole of its history, and on one occasion damaged his hand, as he brought it down edgewise on the middle of the horizontal desk-lamp. You felt it all mattered intensely, and it was the same with his philosophy lectures, though I followed very little there. I walked all the way from Mill Lane lecture rooms up Pembroke Street and Downing Street to Emmanuel reciting 'Dem Ich wird das Nicht-Ich entgegengesetzt', 'the "I" is opposed to the "non-I"', which ought to have been simple enough, though it somehow mystified me. But



Brock was to become more and more confused, probably thanks to Heidegger's treatment of him. It was said in later years that he would sit in supervisions with his chair backed into a corner, explaining that in this way he could be sure of not being stabbed in the back. His dreamy moist eyes and loosely held lips are vivid in my memory.

It is often said that universities are places where young people educate each other. That isn't untrue, but would hardly apply to the little Marxist University that was set up, perhaps before my arrival in 1938. With the teaching on economics I had had at school it seemed the only intelligent course to take was to join the Socialists, so I paid my subscription to the C.U. Socialist Club, not knowing that it owed its character to people like Palme Dutt, J.B.S. Haldane, Maurice Dobb, J.D. Bernal, Joan Robinson, the Roy Pascal who taught me about translation and Kim Philby, Anthony Blunt, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, or that 'Socialist' meant 'Communist'. My own view of it was from a worm's eye. I was impressed at one meeting by someone who could actually quote Lenin, of whose works I knew absolutely nothing. I used the Socialist Restaurant in Falcon Yard because I could get a meal there for sixpence less than at the Blue Barn, but I was almost the only one to do so and gave it up when the menu became almost invariably shepherd's pie with apple charlotte. I joined in at least one demonstration at which we sang, to the tune used by Disney's seven dwarfs, 'Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, for Chamberlain must go. We'll pull the chain on Chamberlain with a heigh, heigh-ho!' The only interesting activity I remember was a discussion group at Christ's which met once a week under the chairmanship of a woman wearing an impressive, thick, Russian-looking skirt, and at which each of us read a paper for discussion on some previously allocated topic. One of mine concerned the ideas of the nineteenth century inventor of social units called phalansteries, Fourier. I looked him up in the Britannica and have never forgotten his naïve ideas. I also gave a 'Marxist' analysis of seventeenth century French literature, of which I had read not more than a dozen works. At the end of the second term I plucked up courage to say that I thought poorly of what I had presumed to say, and that I wasn't impressed by what the others had offered either. To my surprise, and to the chagrin of the lady with the skirt, all but she agreed, and we never met again. Yet there was still an atmosphere of enthusiasm, engendered partly by the death of the Cambridge man, John Cornford, fighting in the International Brigade in Spain in 1936, and Julian Bell, though I knew nothing of him at the time. There was a cause to fight for, heroes were dying for it. Like hundreds of other members of C.U.S.C., it never occurred to me that any of us might spy for the Russians. Those who did were a tiny minority. The rest were probably trying out ideas, not committing themselves to them.

On one issue there was no time for trying things out. As 1939 wore on the question of pacifism, passive resistance, became acute. I am not sure now why I changed my mind.

Though a broken bootlace had started me off, my membership of the P.P.U. was serious, but I could not meet the arguments of friends who said that Hitler would be totally unmoved by passive resisters. The Jews were passive resisters, and no good had come from that. I might have retorted that we should give the idea a longer trial. Some of my friends did. We all went to the Assize Court on Castle Hill in the first term after the war started, to support a friend who had to appear before a tribunal. He was allowed to work on the land instead of doing military service. But a school friend, Bill Page, who had never shown any sign of sharing my beliefs before, refused to join a combatant unit, and was blown up trying to defuse an unexploded bomb. For myself, I was swung along partly by the popular movement of feeling, as I was when I gave the Hitler salute in Munich, though I had also been affected by argument. When war was declared on 3 September 1939 I was more sorry for myself than for anyone else - I went up to my bedroom and cried a bit, more because I didn't expect to last long than out of fellow-feeling. (Incidentally, the air-raid siren sounded almost as soon as Chamberlain had finished his broadcast at 11 a.m. Dad said 'the swine! They must have taken off even before he began speaking', and everybody rushed out into the street to see the bombers, as if they had been a show. It turned out to be a false alarm.)

A few days later an announcement said that Cambridge students could volunteer in Cambridge - presumably this would make it easier to keep records. So I went up at the appointed time, had a medical in the old Index Room of the Library (now the Senior Combination Room of the University) and asked to make an affirmation, rather than swear on the Bible. That would be a nuisance, said the Officers Training Corps man on duty. He would have to send for a notary - wouldn't I spare him the trouble and do like everybody else? The Bible was open, he assured me, at the dirtiest place in the whole book. Even that schoolboy snigger didn't put me off, and I conformed again. There was an interview then, at which I said I was useless with machines, and it was agreed that in that case I wouldn't do for the artillery. Inevitably it was to the artillery I was posted, a year later. Meanwhile I had one more year at the university, in the Army but not of it.

It was not a university as it had been in peacetime. The blackout tended to keep people in their own colleges; university societies suffered loss of members, and sporting events were hampered by the absence of most of what would have been the third year men, whose call-up was not postponed. It was thanks to this depletion that I rowed in the first boat in the 'March Eights' - the substitute for the usual 'Lents' - and became president of the debating society, since Greenwood had not come back from New Zealand (I think - must check). I acted in several plays put on by the college dramatic society, incongruously called 'The Dionysiacs'. Dionysius would have laughed to see our church-hall one-acters, and we ourselves felt we wanted something more avant-garde than 'Twixt the Soup and the

Savoury', or 'The Convict on the Hearth'. Somerset Maugham, for instance. But the society was run by the Dean, Hugh Burnaby, a delightful, shy, generous man, related to the then famous comedian Davy Burnaby, and he would have nothing more advanced than a detective play by A.A. Milne. I ought not to complain: his Sunday evening gramophone concerts in his own rooms were almost my first introduction to classical music. But mild was the word, and gentle the action.

My rooms were in New Court in this my second year. My old set in North Court I found occupied by R.A.F. 'A.C. plonks', six in my study and six in my bedroom. They were not allowed to light fires as it was too dangerous, so I count myself lucky that my bedmaker in the new rooms always put a match to mine before I got up. Even so, it was a bitterly cold winter, and as there was no fireplace in the bedroom I 'cycled' between the sheets to warm up before going to sleep. The water in my washbasin was often frozen, and on one occasion when 'Scotch eggs' were served for dinner I got up in the night and ran through three courts to the nearest lavatory, behind the Library, only to find a queue. It was at least better than being in the Army. But while the 'phoney war' continued we were only told at the end of term, or perhaps later, whether we could come back into residence the following term. This made study more desultory than it might have been. I did my stint, and remember with some pleasure Henry Garland's supervisions in German, though I felt quite unable to write intelligently about Heine and others whose experience seemed so infinitely more passionate and extensive than mine. In French, my supervisor was a Canadian who saw us in threes, had each of us read his essay aloud, and turned us out at five to the hour, on the dot, so that we heard next to nothing but each other's views. I feel almost self-educated, seeing that because of the war I had no third year as an undergraduate. That must account for some of my maverick ways in literary studies.

It was also because of the war that I saw much more of Pat than I had expected. We had met only a few times since we first met in France. Bedford College, where she was in her third year, was evacuated to Cambridge along with several of the London colleges, so we often had breakfast together, went to lectures together, and argued about religion, my atheism against her 'liberal' Christianity of the Student Christian Movement kind. I thought I had won her over, but found fifteen years later I was wrong. That is all fifty years ago now, and we have lived together most of that time. It's difficult to remember one year from another, but I know I asked her to marry me, in the fields near Madingley, and she wouldn't. When I asked her the second time, at Headingley near Epsom, it was under a tree, and because she let me kiss her I took it for granted she meant yes, and went into raptures about the tree and how our love would grow, as in fact it has, but I think Pat was so surprised she didn't like to tell me I was mistaken. From that day on I thought of us both as married, in

intention anyway. Yet I had hardly kissed a girl in my life before. When I was fourteen or so and a patrol-leader I had taken my opposite number in the Girl Guides just beyond the penumbra of the street-lamps along Clapham Common, but I still feel her hard gums, and she must have been terrified of me. After that I scarcely spoke to a girl, probably for fear of being rejected, though also because Baden Powell (principally) had lodged in me, and I had welcomed, the idea that a kiss was equivalent to marriage vows. I saw very few girls in any case. From the age of seven till I was eighteen I went to all-male schools. Choir-practice and Scouts at least twice a week meant two evenings spent with boys, and church on Sunday - choir and Sunday school, making three attendances a day - added to the segregation, as did Saturday afternoon school sport. In my middle 'teens I was so compliant in doing all the homework I was set that the masters in my Sixth Form years, discovering my conscientiousness, took fright, and set less. I would run half a mile every weekday evening to the Battersea public reference library, where I would sometimes moon over one particularly pretty girl, but I generally stayed till closing time at ten, and ran home feeling wonderful with the air in my lungs. I wasn't really chaste: I would fantasize in my bedroom. But when a distant cousin from Wales came up for the choir festival at Crystal Palace I ran round and round the table in our front room, escaping her wild clutches and reeking armpits. And at university there were hardly any women to be seen. To visit a girl at Girton in 1938 you had to make an appointment, tell the janitress on arrival, and wait till the girl came to take you to her room. There was no requirement to put the sofa or bed in the corridor, as myth relates of Newnham. But in any case Pat was my girlfriend by that time, and in the following year I would probably not have gone out with a girl at all, what with the closeness of college life, if she had not actually come to Cambridge herself. I say all this not to say she was the only choice I had - she was very attractive, and we talked no end - but to show how monkish my life had been. It remained so, for the most part, even after we married in 1942, since we saw very little of each other till 1946.

The 'phoney' war dragged on until the Easter Term 1940, when the German invasions began. The evacuation of Dunkirk came as I was sitting exams in the Corn Exchange, though I was almost more concerned about my streaming hay-fever nose, and the notice in huge black letters on the wall by my desk - as the Corn Exchange was still used by farmers - telling me what to do if I had warble-fly. I impressed Pat no end, after I had told her, coming out, that I thought I had got a first, by actually getting one. But it was Prelims, not the Tripos itself, which as I'll explain, I never had to take.

There was still no call-up. The barracks and camps were full of the men who had escaped from the Dunkirk beaches, and I had three more months of freedom before my papers arrived. I had little idea what I should do. I volunteered to fill sandbags, but some

bureaucrat said I was not allowed to, as it was a civilian job and I was already, technically, in the Army. How did we ever win the war? So I wrote to Tom Harrison, a sociologist whose book about his experiences on Malekula, a cannibal island where pigs were currency, had interested me, and asked for a job with Mass-Observation, one of the first opinion polls organisations. I had read about that, too, in a Penguin Special. To my surprise Harrison interviewed me and gave me an assignment. I was to ring him early each day and write down twelve questions which he would dictate to me. I was to go to Clapham Junction and ask ten people at random what their answer to the questions might be, then ring him back with the answers. It took little time, people were quite willing to answer, and I earned what seemed a huge amount. Later I covered a by-election in Croydon, where I enjoyed myself in what I thought looked like workmen's clothes and hung about taxi drivers' tea-cabins, or knocked on doors, respectably dressed, to sound out opinions. I was impressed by the number of women who at once replied 'Oh, my husband's not home till six'. I even got to interviewing the Conservative candidate, Henry Willink, later Master of Magdalene College. But my incipient journalism was not to last. Tom Harrison gave me the sack, in the kindest way - I wonder he ever took me on - and I found myself somehow in the Rationing Office at Marylebone Town Hall. This was the only time in my life I ever worked office hours all in the same spot, and I marvel still at how people can stand it. I had charge of the addressograph machine on which all addresses of ration book holders were typed on strips of lead piled one above another. When a circular was sent you put an envelope in, pulled a handle, a lead strip was pressed against the envelope, and the weight of the rest brought the next strip in its place. But though I typed inventions of my own and bits of German poetry,

Es schwimmt der Zigarettentrauch  
 Durch meines hohen Mundes Winkel  
 Und fällt in meinen leeren Bauch  
 Wie leiser Regen, pinkel-pinkel.

(Not in the Oxford Book of German Verse)

I found waiting till 6 p.m. to be released hard going. I was insulting to the head of section, putting my feet up on my desk like a regular Cambridge man, and he never objected.

## WAR

Meanwhile the war was getting hotter. We were at a party on the far side of Clapham Common - Bill Page was there, the man who was blown up later - when somebody called us out into the street. Looking towards the East we saw a red glow far across the width of the evening sky. The first raids had begun, on London Docks. After that we regularly took shelter in the cellar of Mr Beaumont, the insurance clerk next door - not the one belonging to the railway guard in the other direction - which had only a little coal in it. Then an Anderson shelter was delivered, and installed in our own back yard. It was made of corrugated iron, sunk to half its depth in the earth, with three or four places close together either side. I read Uncle Remus stories aloud, and hugged Pat, if she had come over from Southfields and been forced to stay. We heard quite a few crumps of bombs going off, but nothing fell near us. The first night was worst, when the anti-aircraft guns remained silent. I heard later that they were not powerful enough to reach the height at which the raiders were flying. But the second night they blazed away, and we were comforted to know we were at least being defended.



Apart from hours in the shelter - we were never in it for more than three or four hours and never slept all night in it - life was not very different. There was still the blackout, which we had got used to, and rationing. Dad was somebody in Air Raid Precautions, and had - a bit later on - an allotment for growing vegetables on the Common, in response to the 'Dig for Victory' campaign. You were supposed to carry your gasmask with you in a cardboard box

wherever you went. But even after Dunkirk, rallied by Churchill, we went on contentedly rather than defiantly. The victory in the Battle of Britain was a tonic. When it ended we felt secure against invasion, at any rate for the time being. But the bombs were still dropping, and when in September my call-up papers arrived, a year after the war had begun, I felt I was leaving dangerous London for the complete safety of Army life. It was my parents who were in the front line. My sister Sylvia, who had been evacuated to Windsor at the outbreak, was in less danger than they were, but I was in the least dangerous place of all.

A special train took all recruits from Paddington to Devizes, where we were met by a sergeant who treated us with unexpected politeness. There were complaints after we had been square-bashing on the parade ground. 'He doesn't realise we're married men, with kiddies', one man said. 'He's no business talking to us like that'. I don't remember for my own part that I suffered any sharp dressing-down, or anything much else than boredom. Initial training at this Anti-Aircraft training regiment was for two months, but I was one of the privileged now. Thanks to my knowledge of the Lewis gun, and the 'Certificate "A"' I had acquired before I quitted the O.T.C., I was now a Potential Officer, equal with the rest for the time being, but not after two months. 'You're all right', said one recruit, 'you're going to be in the Officers' Mess warming your arse while we're doing all the work'. It was an ironical position for an ex-pacifist to be in. Worse, I was amazed by the feeble bodies I saw in the gym, men unable to do a press-up or leap the vaulting horse, which I had been doing at school for years without a thought for men in factories, men driving lorries, men in offices. The anti-aircraft regiments had less athletic men than the infantry, I supposed, but they had a long way to go before they would be fighting fit. At the end of two months they marched out, to batteries that might be in action at any moment. We, the P.O.'s, or Piss-Offs, as they called us, stayed on in a hut of our own until such time as there was room for us at the Officer Cadet Training Unit. We were all public schoolboys or not far from it, and since we had been shown how to load and fire the one 3.7 inch heavy A.A. gun that stood by the barracks at Roundway Hill, we were often deputed to defend the rest of our mates. So we had our first real taste of Army life, endless hours hanging about with nothing to do, a token force that could be pointed to if the C.O. was ever blamed for not thinking of air-raids.

Segregation increased our sense of distance. When we had shared a hut with all the rest we would hear the views of a violence we never felt ourselves. 'Know what my mum says?' said an East Ender from London, where the bombing had been worst, 'She wants to get old Hitler, pin his eyelids back and drop hot lead on his eyes'. We had been noticeably different from the start. Norman Chapman, who first taught me chess, a shy, round-shouldered man who carried his head slightly tilted to one side, was asked by the

bombardier on arrival what religion he professed. 'Agnostic', Norman replied. 'Well, what's that?' said the bombardier, maybe affecting not to know. 'High Church, Low Church, Nonconformist?' Most of us said 'C. of E.', having heard that although this involved attending Church parades, it was better than the alternative, cleaning out the latrines, no doubt intended to impress on the infidels what they were really worth. Again our distance from the others was shown when we - Norman and I - taxed the chaplain with the disgrace attending non-attendance, as well as with his sermon, which had ended with a peroration adjuring us to keep away from women. Why, we asked, had he said this and that about God, and the resurrection and so on, and why had he said, with about equal reason, that since the nation was equally divided in numbers between men and women, there was one woman for each man, and that was enough? It was in the Naafi, or army restaurant where we could pass the evening with a cup of tea and a chess set, and the chaplain was quite forthcoming. He didn't believe these things himself, he said, or not quite in that way. But it was for 'the men', it was the only way they could be helped to understand. I remembered Frau Wülker, who was equally cheerful and nice about helping people to understand, and I grew more aware that I was on the other side of the barrier, with the Piss-Offs and not with the men.

Even we saw extremes beyond our own. The man unfortunately called Leake, who prayed kneeling by his bedside before lights out, did so while P.O.'s cavorted all round him. Funnier still was the ex-Territorial Army officer in charge of us at the gun-site, a Lieutenant Eakin. We regaled ourselves with stories of how he had rung up the adjutant to tell him the range-finder was not working. 'Hello there' - in purest Cheltenham accents - 'Hello. Eakin speakin. I say, you know, this bally old range-finder's stopped working. Yes. I think there's a screw loose. Eh? No, I haven't got a screw loose.' He was the image of effete inefficiency, the 'schlaffer Engländer' that Frau Wülker had seen in me. Among the rest of us there were quite a few who would have fitted her conception equally well. I went on with my mass-observing, jotting down remarks here and there, and asking people questions such as what we were fighting for. The idea was that mass-observers would eventually send their records to Tom Harrison, though I never did that. 'What we're fighting for? Well, if the Nazis come they'd start ordering people about on our farm.' Or when John Kennedy's father, U.S. Ambassador in London, was reported as saying the British were bound to lose, and it wouldn't be long now: 'Too true, old chap. And the sooner the better.' There was more self-interest and disaffection than seemed possible a year or two later.

Another two months passed before we finally left Devizes for the O.C.T.U. (Officer Cadets' Training Unit). By that time we had all been for interviews, and some had been asked whether they wouldn't prefer the tanks or the infantry. I don't believe any did: there



were certainly comic stories in the hut later, about how such suggestions had been received. So now we were pretty well all of us posted to Shrivenham near Swindon, to become what all said was the lowest form of army life.

My chief recollection of Shrivenham makes me astonished that I ever passed the course. Of the drill and lectures and field practice I remember nothing, except that we were near the wonderful White Horse cut on the chalk hillside, and that I was taught to drive a car for four hours and issued with a driving licence on the strength of that alone. I had a good friend there, John Guest, an adviser to Collins the publishers and a friend of the poet Christopher Hassall, who would entertain us with stories of how he had been confronted by an officer 'with dadoes of pips', and with other stories similarly embellished. It was John who introduced me, long after my first hearing about Dostoevsky from the speaker on Clapham common, to *Crime and Punishment*, and many other books, though I can have read few of them at the time. What really remains in memory is the adjutant at inspections, trailing his white-gloved hand in search of dust in unlikely places. Much of our spare time for several weeks was spent on cleaning the polished wooden floor - the O.C.T.U. had been a kind of Sandhurst in peacetime, and was quite unlike the temporary huts we were used to. The space between the beds had grown darker with dirt and use, and the order was to restore the whole surface to its original shining brown. No brushes or soap were provided. We took to scraping the floor with knives, secreted in the dining hall and honed on the stone staircase. In my usual impractical way I attacked my section, going across the grain and producing a roughened surface that could not be smoothed by any manner or means. The rest of the room helped me out by rearranging the beds so that my shameful part was hidden, and though I could not believe my luck, the adjutant failed to see it. This accustomed me and no doubt everybody else to the idea that the Army's main concern was to play silly buggers. But I learned little, and nearly fell again before I was through. John and I shared later a bedroom in what had once been married quarters for 'other ranks' - we had many good conversations there, though I only remember him mildly objecting to my rubbing my toes when I had athlete's foot, and leaving flakes of skin all over the floor, which at least shows what friends we were. At the end of our four months came the passing-out parade at which we were to be reviewed by a general, and were expected to shine like guardsmen. Somehow John and I started late from our bijou residence, and had to run to reach our file in time. Again I was seized with perversity and took a short cut across a bit of grass that turned out to be muddy. There was a pre-inspection by our own junior officer, at which I took one pace smartly forward - better make a clean breast of it now than have the C.O. discover my filth in front of the general and shouted 'Permission to wipe the mud off the heel of my boot. Sir!'. 'No', he said, and I knew I was done for. 'But you can put your hat-badge outside your

hat-band.' The C.O. came. The general came. Past me with my re-arranged hat-badge. Along the bank of the rank where my heel was flashing morse-code at them. But presumably they were looking at the hat-badges in the rank behind, and all I got was a rollicking from our own chap. Another week and I was Second Lieutenant, Royal Artillery, wondering who needed me.

It was Southsea Common, Portsmouth, where a land-mine had just been dropped on the gun-position officer, who had to be replaced. He had been a Territorial Army officer, a peace-time volunteer, as were the whole battery, officers and men, which made things easier for me than if I had been posted to a Regular Army unit. Bank managers, businessmen only eighteen months or so previously, they made no comment as my intellectual interests began to show themselves. On the shelf in the room allocated to me I put my Russian grammar, my Leninism by Stalin, the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and no doubt other less outrageous titles, though I don't remember them, and though my batman may have noticed, nobody said a word, even though at this time the Soviet-Nazi pact was in operation. My interest was academic anyway, as it had been in Cambridge. I merely wanted to find out more about communism. And yet I scarcely looked inside those books, they were more for show.

The training I had had so far, and the pacifism I had so recently given up, had done nothing to make me a soldier. I ought to have been out with the guns, learning every bolt and nut, examining the shells, learning to drive a lorry, but I took the easy way that had been predicted for me. The Major, a piratical-looking man with a patch over one eye but a suburban fair moustache and a benign manner, sent me off to learn how to ride a motor-bike, which I did, under instruction, by slithering down sandhills with the engine off, trying to hold on with the brake - Army ways again, throwing you in at the deep end. After that I was qualified to ride round to the other batteries in the regiment delivering pay-packets, but I cornered too fast and drove into a hedge. The Major blinked benignly at that, as he did also when I was sleeping in a bell-tent not far from the guns, ready to rush over if needed and help the man on duty, but slept on even when the guns fired. They had written me off, as appeared before long.

Before long I was posted to Gilkicker Point on the other wide of Portsmouth Harbour, where there were 4.5 inch naval guns with armoured hoods like the ones on battleships. They had been converted for very high elevation, but by the time I saw them Hitler had invaded Russia, and there was not much for us to do. One night we had reports of a Heinkel that had been crippled and was flying low over the countryside, making for the sea. We kept our ears open, and suddenly it zoomed straight at us. 'Independent fire! Fire!' I shouted, and

again and again, 'Fire! Why the hell aren't you firing, Number One?' They couldn't fire. The Heinkel was so low that the barrels were pointing almost into the wall of sandbags surrounding the site, and the shells hitting them would have blown us all up. So my one adventure ended.

If the Germans had known what our defences were like, and had not invaded Russia, they could have walked in at that time. Vast quantities of guns and ammunition, tanks, vehicles of all kinds had been abandoned at Dunkirk, and an anti-aircraft regiment had low priority for replacements, even though we were on the seashore. There were a few rifles and one Lewis gun, my old friend, for a battery of a couple of hundred men or more. Our naval guns were not positioned for action against ships or barges, and there was scarcely any barbed wire. I don't remember that we had any liaison with mobile troops in our rear, and we certainly never practised for an invasion, though there were rumours of large numbers of dead Germans being washed up further West, at Plymouth. But some plans were made. An Army Council Instruction appeared while I was there, advising how to use pieces of lead piping as weapons, and how to make them more lethal by filling them with sand and sealing top and bottom.

Suddenly there was bustle and hurry, we had been ordered abroad, no doubt to North Africa we all supposed. 'We', that is, the regiment. Not me. Nobody told me I had disgraced myself unforgivably, and perhaps I hadn't. But I could quite see they needed somebody more professional, so I spent some of the rest of the summer, after they had gone, in command of Fort Nelson, Fareham, one of the forts Palmerston had built overlooking the Portsmouth area, when the French had been the threatening nation. I was still a lieutenant, and all I had to do was supervise the redecoration of the inside, which was to be converted into a headquarters. Once again I sat back and read. It was unthinkable for an officer to paint walls in his shirtsleeves, or so I felt, and so did my sergeant, an intellectual himself, who had never had a Certificate 'A'. The war drifted on, and no Germans came. I sat underground at Bognor Regis and Slough, I went on courses. At Manorbier, Wales, I helped to shoot into the sea a Tiger Moth with automatic pilot that was pulling a sleeve for target practice. At Devizes again I learned in two weeks how electricity is generated, how cathode ray tubes work, and how radar is used for tracking enemy aircraft, but our regiment never had radar. At Salisbury I ran through clouds of poison gas, learned how to treat wounds from mustard gas, jumped off high walls wearing my gas mask, but gas was never used as a weapon by either side.

The winter of 1941-42 was bitterly cold. I was stationed near an aerodrome south of Bristol, where we had pleasant company, especially Dan Driver, who drew well with a pencil.

To keep warm while on duty we ran the men up and down the gun-site, even playing leap-frog with them, so things were changing. I gave talks on politics, using the marvellous pamphlets issued by the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, something I looked forward to every week. One day I was complimented by a gunner on not warming my arse by the fire while the rest got on with the job: even more progress. But there was still almost nothing to do. A German plane would come over at long intervals, either on reconnaissance or to force us to keep up home defences instead of sending more troops overseas. But the chances of hitting one were slim. Anti-aircraft fire was chancy in any case. The plane had to be kept in view through a telescope mounted on a predictor - a calculating machine in a cube-shaped metal frame, which worked out where the plane would be, given its speed and direction, by the time the shell reached it, given the shell's speed and the rate at which its fuse burned. Weather reports were supposed to be received every so many hours, so that wind direction and barometric pressure (influencing the fuse-burning) could be allowed for. When the senior operator of the predictor - there were three, one turning a wheel for elevation, one for compass direction, and one reading a cylindrical graph - decided that the right conditions were fulfilled, he shouted 'Fire!'. The Gun Position officer then shouted 'Fire!' as well and the sergeant in charge of each gun shouted 'Fire!'. A gunner pushed the trigger, and off went the shell. To reload, a heavy tray had to be swung outwards, a shell and cartridge, about three foot long and weighing quite a lot, had to be placed in it, and the tray swung back in alignment with the gun-barrel. Really rapid fire was not possible, and the imprecision of the repeated orders, which were meant to be allowed for by the predictor operator when he made his shout, left a lot to chance. Wind and barometric pressure could change quite a bit too, in a short space of time. So we were sceptical when we were congratulated by H.Q. on being credited with a hit. If it was our shell in fact, and not another battery's, we were lucky and that was all. After I had left the Ack Ack much more rapid fire became possible, but the new guns were still far from firing guided missiles.



*Ron and Pat's wedding day 1942*

Spring 1942 arrived, still with almost no action. The centre of Bristol had been destroyed already, you drove past ruin after ruin, but I was now stationed on the North side, Cribbs Causeway, high up, with a view towards the Severn, and pleasant company once again. Pat and I had agreed to get married, so I bought Marie Stope's Married Love, which I left lying about in the mess, to everyone's amusement, including the middle-aged A.T.S. officer, as we now had women operating the predictors. I really needed to read up what to do. Then on April 10 I was off to London, where Pat and I were married next day at Wandsworth Registry office. I had doubts at the last minute; I expect she did too. Does anybody not have them? But she looked trim and beaming, with her little hat tilted forward and down, and her blouse and two-piece suit, if that's the word - jacket and skirt, anyway. I wore uniform, Sam Browne belt and peaked cap, but forgot to take my pipe and tobacco pouch and other things out of the large side pockets which should have lain flat and in fact bulged as though inhabited by white mice. Our honeymoon was at Ford Farm, near Honiton

in Devon, and that made my second experience of country life, counting Wicken as the first. Pat celebrated by losing her wedding-ring in a field where we were helping somehow with haystacks or strawstacks. Astonishingly one of the farm hands found it for us the same afternoon. But the rest of our time there, a week, was all primroses and country walks and Lyme Regis, and my first taste of 'rough' cider, in a pub, where I drank only half a pint and afterwards walked down the road needing some steering.

Now began the chapter of accidents that kept us close to each other for almost all the rest of the war. I had never been posted far away, but now it was as though someone had spotted Pat had taken a job teaching French and Latin at Odiham Grammar School, on the fringe of the Army-dominated area round Aldershot. Not long after we had married I was posted to Blackdown Camp, only a few stations up the Southern Railway from the station serving Odiham. I had been seeing Pat there, before we married, on my 48-hour leaves, nipping into bed with her when the house was quiet, but being as good as gold. Now we moved to a lovely old room on Odiham High Street, from where I could bike the few miles to Hook station, take the bike with me on the train, and bike another mile or two to be on parade at 8. It was tricky in the blackout, and I nearly landed in the ditch several times, but bliss for a newly-married man in uniform, in a country at war, with very few responsibilities. All I had to do was train women in the use of the predictor. I made up a lecture on how it worked - both makes, the Vickers and the Sperry - and enjoyed that as a pure exercise in putting ideas across. The women didn't need to know. All they had to do was turn the handles and keep the plane in their sights. There were some Aberdeen fishwives in one intake, using fouler language than I had ever heard in my life, but that was little compensation for the boredom of continually supervising their handle-turning, and the humiliation of having been posted to such a supremely comfy job. I began to think of ways of saving my self-esteem, and scanned Army Council Instructions as in peace-time I would have read the Jobs Vacant page. How about volunteering as a commando? I seriously told myself I would not like knifing sentries in the back. How about a posting to some more active artillery unit? I didn't want simply to go back to the kind of unit I had just been in. I went to see the C.O., a fat, bald headed man who spent most afternoons asleep with his head on the desk. Nothing doing. Then I turned to a page in the A.C.I.'s that looked to have just the thing. Volunteers needed for training as pilots, Air Observation Post. At 14 or 15 I had wanted to take a short-service commission in the R.A.F., and go on later to be an airline pilot. I used to draw aeroplanes, read about theory of flight, the theory of course was one of the main things - and I even founded at school the Icarus Society, which was supposed to be for flying home-made model aeroplanes, though we mostly brought our 'Frog' Spitfires, packed in neat boxes from the shop. I suppose I had forgotten about all that when I joined

the Army. At all events, this seemed just the thing. Danger at last, but I had to do something for the Jews in Germany. Horrible things were being done to them, though I am not sure now just what we thought they were. I remember only that the strongest possible urge to get away from Blackdown came from wanting to do something for them - the Sir Galahad strain all over again.

It was May 1943 before anything happened, so I had had the best part of a year's married life, week after week in sleepy Odiham with its street running between sloping grassy banks, and its old grammar school and church. We saw quite a lot still of Kathleen Clinker and her husband, with whom Pat had lodged before we married, and Kathleen's sunny presence is still part of the happy memory. Pat and I helped at a youth club of sorts, of which I only remember that one farmer's boy, taking a look at my pistol, pointed out it had rust on it. It was true, and a symbol of the kind of life I was leading, though he just meant the rust.

Then came the posting to Hatfield, where about thirty of us, all officers, were housed in Nast Hyde, a modernistic dwelling commandeered for the duration. No more idylls now. Physical training on the lawn before breakfast, rain or fine, and a coach to the airfield, literally a field surrounded by hedges and trees, with a few huts in one corner. Boredom began again, oddly, because although we had lectures on navigation, and practice in reading Morse code from flashing lamps, most of the day went in playing poker, toggled up in unzipped flying jackets, waiting our turn to fly. When the turn did come, it was another matter. The aircraft were Tiger Moths with open cockpits, one in front for the instructor, the other for you, the pupil, and they were as safe as houses, if only I could have got that idea into my head. But I had only my four hours driving a car and my slightly disastrous experiences with a 1000 c.c. motor-bike to get me used to the idea of travelling fast, and a Tiger Moth had to go very fast, to my way of thinking, to get in the air at all. It wasn't like doing 60 in a car, which goes more or less where you tell it. The Tiger Moth would be blown about by the wind, the ground was bumpy, and the hedge would look terrifyingly near before we finally cleared it and soared away. I was glad to feel the rudder bar being kicked this way and that for me by the instructor, because my reactions were extremely slow. One man went solo in three hours. I'm sure he had an M. G. and silk scarves for wearing in it. I took the maximum twelve hours, before they said I must have a go, come what may.

The ground crew man stood by the propeller. 'Contact'. 'Contact'. Just like the old films, like Hell's Angels, that I had so wanted to see. Swing went the propeller and I roared across the ground, cleared the hedge, soared up, shouting and singing like mad. All I had to do was a 'circuit and bump' - turn left at a thousand feet, complete a circle and land. I made

my approach to the field feeling confident. Nearly on the ground I realised I was still moving horizontally - surely the tail had to come down, surely I ought to be not horizontal but at an angle, nose up? I pulled the joystick back to get the tail down, and swept across the airfield, at an angle, nose up, but not landing. As the hedge appeared I opened throttle, pulled the stick back further, and went round again. Another lovely approach, touch-down, horizontal movement, tail not coming down, sweep across the airfield and away over the hedge again. As I looked over the side of the cockpit I could see the ambulance and the fire-tender moving out from the hutment area. My instructor must be wild. Gentle approach, touchdown, ah! You don't have to get the tail down leave it alone and it settles of its own accord. I made a perfect three-point landing. And nobody said a word against me. I had qualified for more circuits and bumps. Also for flying upside down, hanging by my straps with my head further out of the cockpit than usual, feet fighting gravity to reach the rudder bar. Also for stopping the engine in mid-air, in case it ever stopped by itself, gliding with the propeller visible, slanting, then straight into a vertical drive, hoping the engine would start in time, from the rush of air. It always did. I liked practising to land in small fields and soaring away again at the last moment, and stall turns where you stood on your tail and flicked over into a dive, out of which you emerged flying horizontally but still sinking. Looping the loop was similar, except that you turned over backwards before reaching stalling point. Swooping out of the top of the loop was better than most things. Flat spins were horrible. After some weeks I had done sixty or seventy hours, even flown to Cambridge and back, navigating a triangular course.

My personal instructor was Gabby, a Welshman, witty of course, and ironic, patient with me beyond belief. 'We 'aven't done a shoot-up Gray ole boy, 'ave we?' and no, we hadn't. It wasn't in the book of practical things to do, either. So off we went to a low-flying practice area so that I could do some low-flying, and Gabby could dive over the searchlights where his girlfriends in the A.T.S. had their huts. As we came in sight Gabby took over and went into a dazzling display of aerobatics, low down, twist and turn, roll and up again, which quickly brought out twenty or more girls in khaki blouses and skirts. For his final number Gabby went into a stall turn. The nose pointed at the sky, tipped sideways, we nose-dived and flattened out. At this point I noticed we were over a wood, with the taller trees rising slightly higher than us. We touched one with the tip of a wing and landed on our side, ripping off both wings on my left, within a few yards of the huts. Gabby could hardly have managed better. The girls were at us in a flash, undoing our belts, our parachutes, lifting us on to the ground, and carrying us indoors. We hadn't damaged a finger. Gabby was concussed, but I had only a broken wristwatch to show for it. Still, the attention we got was gratifying. Splendid planes, Tiger Moths.



There was an official inquiry, after I got back from several weeks recovering in Odiham from the trauma. (I had a recurrent dream in which the plane sank gently into the wood as though into a sponge, but it took a while longer before I was persuaded flying was really safe.) 'Can you explain, Lieutenant Gray, how this plane came to crash?' I had already been reminded by the squadron leader that Gabby was a very good instructor, and they didn't want to lose him. 'Yes, sir! I was flying in the low-flying area, when the engine began to make a queer sound. Flight Lieutenant Jones said "leave it to me, ole boy", and took over the controls. I don't remember any more.' Why did I need to put in that vivid detail, I wonder now. Forgetting would have been enough. 'You realise, Lieutenant, that the engine has been examined, and no fault found?' 'No sir?' That was all. Forms were filled in and I heard no more.

They had started night-flying while I had been away. I spent some hours in a flight-simulator, a cockpit in a shed which rocked as you moved the controls, and with a hood which stopped you seeing anything but the illuminated dials. Then I was ready to go. We had no electric lights, only a flare path with bonfires in a long avenue. If there was a raid, and there might well be a false alarm as well as the occasional intruder, the bonfires would be put out, and you were to fly round the circuit at an appointed speed and height, keeping a lookout for anybody else trapped in the same way - there were no lights on the Tiger Moths of course. After one circuit with my new instructor - Gabby was still recovering from concussion, I suppose - I felt craven. Would he mind taking me round once more, just to really get the hang of it? We taxied round to the start, when to my horror he clambered out and told me she was all mine. Nobody could have given up in a situation like that. I pushed the throttle forward and got round the circuit without even trying to put the tail down when I landed. Nothing to it.

We were posted soon after to Larkhill on Salisbury Plain, for field artillery training. Most of us were from some other branch, some not even from artillery at all, and we had to learn how field gunners worked out the range by firing just beyond, then just in front of the target, and more or less halving the difference for the direct hit. In the ordinary way they would do this by observing the plume of earth thrown up, but on level ground judgment was difficult. Our job, flying small high-wing monoplanes, Avro Austers, was to fly over the target and radio back information on how the guns were doing. The enemy was not going to like this, and we would need to hedge-hop before soaring over them, and drop back sharply if they were able to fire. A fighter plane, though flying much faster than us, would not risk skimming the ground, unless of course we operated in the desert.

I had known this was the general idea, and started training in the Auster without more qualms than I had had before. But this was where mind lost control over matter. I had every intention of finishing the course, but kept finding myself on the floor, in pubs, in the flight hut, in our billet, being helped to my feet after fainting. This went on for some weeks, till the squadron leader called me in, said he had had reports from my friends about this, and I was to stop flying till I had had a medical. There was nothing the matter with me, as I knew, but they wouldn't have me flying again. I swallowed the shame quite easily, as I didn't feel at all responsible for the fainting fits. But I knew I had failed to be a proper man. It was my first real defeat.

I was determined not to go back to the Ack Ack again, and pointed out, as I had when I first volunteered, that I had a good knowledge of German. So I was posted to Southeastern Command H.Q. at Reigate - only a few miles from Croydon, where Pat was now teaching. We said somebody at the War Office must be looking after us, but whoever it was had no interest in using my German. A counter-intelligence unit at Reigate, where there were no Germans for a hundred miles, had nothing to do but read reports and put pins in maps of the fighting areas. We were in considerable strength only because our C.O. was a Member of Parliament who needed to be close to what he called the Monkey House. I was back to the days of nothing to do.

Months passed, and the flying bombs began to pass over Reigate on their way to London. None landed near us, but I slept every night with my landlady in a Morrison shelter, a metal-topped table in the kitchen, with criss-cross wires at the sides. She was pretty, vivacious, married to an airman, and had a lovely small daughter called Sue, who stayed in my memory when our own Sue was born, and who slept in the shelter with us. But what happened in the rest of Reigate, where thousands of officers and men, billeted on other landladies whose husbands were probably also serving in some other place, had to share the same kind of shelter night after night? And in the rest of England?

By D-Day 1944 I had been in Reigate for the best part of a year. I had also been on an intelligence course in Matlock, at Smedley's Hydro, where all but one door was sealed, for security, and windows were never opened. The stench of foul cigarette smoke was intolerable, and the food was bad. I wrote one of my few bits of verse there, in a parody of Wordsworth.

Lines written to the Minister of Food, Lord Woolton,  
From the Officers' Mess, Smedley's Hydro, Matlock, 1944

WOOLTON, thou should'st be busy at this moment:  
SMEDLEY's hath need of thee, she is a cess  
Of stagnant waters; feeding in the Mess  
Is for her inmates a perpetual torment  
Of squelching vegetables, watery brews,  
Hard tack, stale fish, cold swedes, hacked turnip-tops,  
Gross pudding, half-baked rice - mountainous slops  
Of viscous potato, Oxo stews,  
Vertiginous greens in cold besodden hummocks;  
Food inundated, food derided, mush,  
Food that had made fair BEETON pish and tush.  
Great Sir, restore to us our happy stomachs.  
WOOLTON, thy name is known for one who ne'er funk'd.  
The British belly scorns to be a Schwerpunkt.

(Schwerpunkt is the German military term for the focus of an attack.)

But when there was 'a war on', as we constantly were told, it didn't seem right to complain, and I didn't even do as friends suggested, and pin my effort on the notice-board.

I had been on an interrogation course, too, at Christ's College, Cambridge. We used the tall building in All Saints Passage for lectures and practice, though on one occasion we went out to Fleam Dyke for a taste of what the real thing might be like. I was to be a prisoner, and was given a Luftwaffe uniform with Nazi badges, but came out of the building last, after the rest had gone down to the entrance to Trinity, where the lorries were standing. As I emerged a R.A.F. man with a girl saw me from some fifty yards away, separated by the triangular railings that are still there. He gripped the railings hard, hands wide apart, shouted, and for a moment I wondered if I was going to be shot. But I walked on with such nonchalance that he paused, and soon saw where I was heading. My shadow of the war continued.

I continued, too, to be tops in theory rather than practice. I was a good aircraft navigator, on the ground, and I was top of the class as an interrogator on the course, thanks to my unusually good German. But I didn't shine when we were taken to the 'London Cage' in Kensington, where two Luftwaffe pilots who had been brought down over the Thames were presented to us for practice. They came into the room where thirty or forty future interrogators were waiting, trembling in expectation of being beaten up. (We had been told on the course not to hit prisoners, though we gathered that a pistol lying near to hand was

useful in interrogations in the field, and our Polish instructor was supposed to have chased prisoners round the room waving a chair leg.) We simply walked up to them one after another, and 'addressed a few questions' seems the right phrase. Mine were at least as polite as anybody's. And as with so many of my army courses, I made no use of what I learned on this one. I did some long-range interrogation of prisoners captured on the Atlantic Wall, trying to find out more about the parts of it that had not yet surrendered. But that didn't last more than a few weeks.

While on the Cambridge course I met an American who has remained a friend ever since. Francis Russell of Boston, Massachusetts, was wearing the uniform of the Canadian Black Watch when I first met him, and thereby hung a tale. He had wanted to get into the war long before America joined in, preferably as a fighter pilot, but his eyesight had not been good enough. Hearing that the Canadian air force had less stringent requirements, he determined to reach Canada and enlist there, but was already wearing uniform, and desertion was more than he would contemplate. So he shammed that medical condition in which letters can be recognised but the ability to read words and sentences is lost. That led to six months' confinement in a mental home, where he would have gone out of his mind if a nurse had not realised what he was up to, and lent him books from time to time. At the end of six months he was discharged on medical grounds, made his way to Canada, and failed the test of eyesight there after all. So he had joined the Canadian Army and here he was. He amused us no end, practising hypnosis on anyone willing to let him, though he told a tale of having succeeded some long time ago, and having been unable to restore his subject to normal consciousness without help from a hospital. That was all part of the showmanship, yet his appearance inspired confidence without any trickery. Tall, stooping, with rimless glasses and smiling eyes, he looked the elegant Bostonian. Pat and I cycled to Ely with him, and I recall how we saw a bomber returning from Germany fall out of the sky leaving a perpendicular trail of smoke. He has sent me his books ever since, penetrative, relentless investigations of Boston scandals, the Boston police strike, and above all the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti for murder. He has the same purposeful pursuit of his aims as he had when he got out of the U.S. armed forces. But his marriage to a Chinese woman never looked like succeeding, and didn't.

## BLETCHLEY PARK

I had not many weeks at Reigate after D-Day, the invasion of the European contingent, before I was told to report to Government Communications H.Q. at Bletchley, that village where Cambridge dons used to meet Oxford dons at the railway station, waiting for trains in opposite directions. The name was a cover-up, for 'communication' there was, but not of the kind we supposed. It is well known now that G.C.H.Q. was where, for the greater part of the war, almost every German top-secret document ever transmitted by radio was decoded. It had begun as a small unit in huts close to the country mansion, Bletchley Park, and two of its centres were still called Hut 3 and Hut 6. The volume of traffic decoded had increased until the whole Park, grounds, mansion, huts, was teeming with civil servants, Navy, Army and Air Force officers with their trains, A.T.S., military police, cooks and caterers, bus and lorry drivers. Billets in Bletchley had been filled long ago, and now in 1944 a fleet of coaches went round every village and town for miles around, picking up and putting down passengers three times a day, since there were three shifts and the whole place was working full steam twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

The secret never leaked out. Even if Bletchleyites told anyone what they were doing, which they had all sworn not to do, we know the Nazis never got hold of the information, because if they had had even an inkling they would have stopped using the 'Enigma' system that they had thought so completely reliable. Right up to the end, when Goering radioed a piteous message to his generals, that their shield and buckler had perished - I was pleased with my translation of that, 'Hort der Sicherung' was a poser at first - they suspected nothing. The coverage of U-boat movements was complete, we were told, except for a few months when our decoders were baffled, and the Atlantic shipping suffered badly. The problem was how to use sound information without giving away where it came from. To have sunk every U-boat as soon as it appeared might have won the war of the Atlantic, but there were other zones, and they needed German secrets to be decoded for a longer time. There was the same problem with sinking ships supplying Rommel in North Africa. Their cargoes, departures and destinations were pretty well all known, but again sinking them all might give the game away. Where possible, arrangements were made to send a reconnaissance aeroplane over the Mediterranean, with instructions perhaps to drop out of cloud cover at a particular place where the ships might be. The plane would possibly be brought down, but it would appear, when the convoy was attacked, that it had been spotted, and a radio message sent back before the crash. We were told this in pep talks, and I haven't any way of knowing whether Allied pilots were deliberately sacrificed in this way. A similar story about our foreknowledge of the bombing of Coventry, which was not acted upon for the same

reasons of security, has since been denied, but I am fairly certain we were also told this to make us aware of the implications of what we were doing.

I began at Bletchley on the Yugoslav section, mainly concerned with keeping records of the German order of battle, names of officers and of units, so that directions to move Leutnant Schmidt could be used in foreseeing larger troop movements. This wasn't interesting to me, but I quickly was promoted to the Central Watch, a group of eight or nine who sat round a horseshoe table tossing translations into a basket from which the head of the watch would take them and either send them back for improvement or pass them on. I nearly brought wrath on my head when I tried to say that twenty thousand Transport officers were being moved from Norway, but luckily read my translation again and realised that Toni Otto, signals alphabet for T.O., stood not for Transportoffiziere but To., the abbreviation for tons. We were all likely to get confused since we worked shifts from 4 p.m. till midnight for two days, midnight till 9 for two days, and 9 to 4 (or 6) on two days, coming on again 48 hours later at 4. This arrangement had been agreed by a referendum before I arrived, and was guaranteed to upset anyone's internal clock.

The people I met on the central watch were mostly university lecturers or had had similar jobs: Humphry Trevelyan of the Cambridge German Department, Duggie Parmee, Cambridge French, Peter Eden, later on the Royal Commission for Historical Monuments, Trevor Jones, of Cambridge, later editor of the huge Harrap's German-English Dictionary. If you came across an unfamiliar technical term you went down to Trevor's office and consulted his card-index. The extraordinarily large number of words beginning with 'Aal-' in the Harrap's dictionary was due to Trevor's awareness that 'Aal' is German not only for 'eel' but also for 'torpedo'. Leonard Forster, later Professor of German at Cambridge, and Harold Knight, of the same Department, were also at Bletchley, though not in my section.

The messages, printed out on thin strips and pasted on sheets of paper as telegrams always were at that time, were collected and interpreted before being passed on to Intelligence units outside, but here again secrecy was partly self-defeating. To conceal the origin of the messages in radio signals, the translators used phrases to make it appear they were reading documents copied out in writing. If the receivers, whose sites stretched at least as far as Cairo, were slightly off beam, or if the decoding was not quite successful, a jumble of nonsense was produced, and the resulting gap in the words had to be explained by some pretext like 'blot', 'corner of page torn off', 'signature illegible'! If the decoding failed completely you put, perhaps, 'source was disturbed at this moment', as though our spy had dived out of the windows as a German officer entered the room. Nobody, it seems, ever saw through this. When I was posted to Caserta after the war, it was clear that the secret had

been kept. But that meant our information was not prized at the front as highly as it might have been. When von Rundstedt made his dangerous counter-attack through the Ardennes in 1944, almost piercing through and dividing the Allied forces, Bletchley Park had full details. But because von Rundstedt kept local radio silence to an unusual extent, passing messages by motor-bike or by any other means that could not be picked up by monitors, the back-room boys were not believed. To intelligence interpreters at the front, Bletchley seemed to have no more authority than any other source. The fact that it was basing its advice on precise knowledge of German battle plans, sometimes down to small details, counted for nothing, and had to. It was even said that Montgomery declined to use intelligence based on Enigma, knowing what it was, because he did not want Churchill breathing down his neck, asking why action had not been taken in the light of this or that piece of top-level decoding.

The translators were hacks, compared to the mathematicians and others who had broken the code, in the way Professor Hinsley explains in his books on World War Two intelligence. (The social side is shown in a story in Angus Wilson's *Such Darling Dodos*.)

Surprisingly, there had been almost equal success in World War One, when the Zimmermann telegram was decoded, revealing German plans to encourage an invasion of the U.S.A. from Mexico. As Barbara Tuchman reveals, the decision to tell President Roosevelt about this threat, with encouragement to make it known publicly, swung American opinion decisively in favour of declaring war on Germany. The game was given away, and won. But civilian mathematicians, perhaps any other kind too, do not take easily to military life. The atmosphere at Bletchley was unlike any other wartime institution. The red brick mansion was surrounded by trees and wooden huts for many acres; there was even a parade ground, but I never paraded on it or saw anyone else do so. Crossing it one day with Major Lionel Loewe, a regular soldier in the Intelligence Corps, I saw a corporal thunder towards us, slamming his black boots together to salute, and heard him ask Lionel to report at once to the Colonel. Lionel looked ironically at me, and I knew what it was all about. He had his forage cap tucked under his shoulder strap, and received a reprimand for it. Understandably, since the Colonel, an infantryman, was mocked by schoolboy graffiti in the officers' mess lavatory, and suffered snubs from some of us who still wore regimental flashes of all kinds, but felt no respect for him. Mixing with all the services, including the Civil, sharing canteen meals with all and sundry, we belonged to Bletchley and no-one else. There were amateur dramatics involving all ranks and non-ranks - I played the art-critic in *The Late Christopher Bean*, with a little white beard stuck on, just like the one of my own I grew twenty years later. Typecasting. There were quartets, song recitals, serious films, a library, a few

trips to nearby villages for concerts. I met university people as I had never done at university, and began to think, since a career as airline pilot was now not so attractive, of taking up an academic one, if I survived.

When I moved out of barracks, which were not much more than a transit station anyway, Army life receded still more. I was billeted first in Leighton Buzzard, along with another officer. We spent long evenings with our landlady, an Irish widow who tried to entertain us with postcards from Dublin, though the other man retired behind a newspaper held upside down. It was too cold to sit in the bedrooms, the nearest pubs and cinema were a long way off through the blackout. In the few days I spent there I returned the entertainment by telling the landlady's fortune in tea leaves, until I overdid it, seeing in them a rose-covered cottage and a man coming through the gate and up the garden path. 'I believe you are making it all up', she said, and complained to the billeting officer. In no time I was moved to another billet, with unforeseeable results.

The other man went on with his newspaper, I supposed. I found myself in an large old detached house, surrounded by gardens, and welcomed by a woman whose husband was serving in North Africa. Her name was Phyllis, she had a boy and a girl aged about five and six, and she lived in a comfortable way, old sofas, brick floors, books untidily on shelves, a grand piano, a gramophone with a large horn, and all the leisure imaginable. She mostly wore a housewrap or a dressing-gown till well on into the day, and of course I spent the night in her house several evenings a week. Her long black hair, dark eyes, and the smell of her armpits were attractive, and so was the tear in the upper sleeve of her dressing gown. It was with her that I first heard 'li mio tesoro' and 'Dalla sua pace' - all I knew of Mozart till then was 'Eine kleine Nachtmusik' - and she introduced me to Beethoven's posthumous quartets, saying that Tchaikovsky had thought them diabolically alluring, or something of that kind. Listening to them late at night I was tempted, but she made no advances, left it entirely to me. When I had a temperature for some days she gave me a blanket bath, in which you lie naked wrapped in a blanket and are sponged down a bit at a time. 'Have you gone off?' she asked, knowing by the smell that I had, almost as soon as she had begun on my chest: a touch had been enough. But we never came any closer than that. I had written, all innocence, to Pat, saying I was now billeted on a woman she'd like to meet, and within a few weeks she had thrown up her teaching job in Croydon and found another one in Leighton Buzzard. For some weeks I had a slight fever, probably what would now be called a glandular one, though I suspect the inner conflict that I scarcely even recognised had a lot to do with it. True, I may have had a recurrence of the lethargy caused by the plane crash. When I was fit Pat and I moved to a billet run by a Salvation Army woman, whose prim rules



became intolerable within a few weeks. We had met, at the Workers' Educational Association class in philosophy, a car-dealer, who offered us a converted furniture van or 'pantehnicon', about the size of a horse-drawn gypsy caravan. It was at the end of his car-breaking yard, with an Elsan some yards away in the driving-cabin of a lorry, separated from the chassis, but without any cesspool. For a couple of months we dug deep holes for our ordures and cooked on a tiny Belling cooker, putting our dustbin out on the street with other people's, till we were told to stop because we paid no rates. Bletchley had made it easier for me to lead a Bohemian life, captain though I was. But the war was almost over. Victory in Europe Day came, and I danced all day in a public square at Leighton Buzzard, sometimes with Pat, sometimes with Phyllis, sometimes with whoever turned up. I have never known a day so ecstatic in all my life. Hitler and all his evil lot were beaten, the good had triumphed, we were going back to peaceful days, the slaughter was over. I shan't ever know such a wonderful illusion again.



*The pantehnicon at Leighton Buzzard 1944*

There was nothing left to do at Bletchley, except for those in the Japanese section. Thousands of us were out of a job, and it was really about time we saw some service overseas, though we had escaped the fighting in Europe. In a few weeks I was posted to a transit station, Wentworth Woodhouse, near Sheffield, and for the first time I felt real sadness. There was much more likelihood I would meet Pat again, than if I had been posted

to the front-line, as millions had been, but it was wretched all the same. We said goodbye on Leighton Buzzard station and I cried for most of the train journey.

I was posted to Italy, not Germany or Austria where I could have used my German again. So I had some sunny days in a villa at Castellamare, looking towards Vesuvius, which I climbed. Most of the days I was cool inside the thick walls of the Royal Palace of Caserta, popping into Naples in the back of a lorry to see the San Carlo opera whenever I could. There was not much else to do in off-duty hours. Most of Naples was marked 'Off limits to troops' - I saw the same stencilled but faded sign in the middle of Genoa as late as 1984 - though small boys invited you in with 'Hey, Signor Capitan! You like my sister! Very nahice, jig-ajig.' Or simply marched behind, chanting 'Signor Capitan! E smok a peep!' When I told them I was an admiral they were tickled pink. But the opera was almost entirely filled with Allied soldiers. We saw all the usual repertory, including *La Gioconda*, *I Pescatori di Perle*, and many more familiar still. On my leaves I saw Paestum, Pompeii, Herculanium, Rome, Florence, Bologna, Posillipo, Amalfi, Positano. I had struck lucky again.

The first notion of what the post-war world was going to be like was when the Forces newspaper announced the end of the war in the Far East. We could hardly believe what little we were told about the bomb in Hiroshima and the one soon after at Nagasaki. Gradually it sank in. We had gone to war against Hitler and the Nazis, and I hadn't any doubt it had been the right thing to do. The thousand-bomber raids on German cities I had somehow accepted as a necessary development; there was no means of stopping them from street-level, though the roar of four-engined planes assembling overhead was awful in itself, even when the bombs were going to be dropped on Hamburg or Essen. Killing hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians without warning was much like exterminating Jews. It brought the war in the Far East to a sudden end, and I understand the relief felt by prisoners in Japanese camps and soldiers fighting in the jungle. But nobody would have tried to force a Japanese surrender by torturing Japanese women and children by the thousand at the front in full view of their own soldiers. The impersonality of the bomb, the small number of people needed to decide on using it and actually dropping it were extremely troubling. Like everybody else I took a long time learning to live with it, though I did in the end.

V.J. Day - Victory over Japan - was very different from V.E. Day. I had danced all day in May. A few months later there was reason enough to be happy, but equally as much to be depressed. So far as I was concerned, I had volunteered to fight - thought I was never asked to do that, as it turned out - because there was no other way I could see of beating Nazi tyranny. Pacifism had obviously been an impossible option, I thought. We had won now by using a weapon that would have caused total revulsion everywhere if it had been used at

Guernica, only about ten years earlier. Civilians had been treated like maggots. John Hershey's book Hiroshima appeared after a while, with details of it all. The price of victory was that everybody had to be callous to a degree that went a long way beyond acceptance of Passchendaele and the Somme. You had to agree that to end the war, save lives of Allied troops in S.E. Asia and the Pacific, end Japanese aspirations, two cities had to be wiped out in an instant, and thousands left with wounds that could never heal. I did agree. I never supported the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, though I came near to supporting it at times. But peace through terror was now the only way. You had to say, at least, that you were willing if necessary to agree much worse evil than had been done to Nagasaki and Hiroshima, with almost equal risk to places far away from any war-zone, even risk to your own cities. It was hard to go on believing we had not gone mad, to maintain it was going to work out all right in the end. It looks for the moment as though the hawks, not the doves, were the wiser. But we are not out of the woods yet, and never will be.

My own luck continued. I had not gone to Italy until July, but thanks to the Bomb I could expect to go home earlier than had looked likely. On top of that, because I had signed up in September 1939 I was on the books as having served since that time and was higher on the list for being shipped home. Piling the cream higher, because my university education had been interrupted, I was entitled to a Class 'B' release, and was in England by Christmas 1945, while men who had been through the North Africa campaign were still kept back. There was no point trying to be fair about that, orders were orders, and Pat and I were in Cambridge by January of the New Year.

## UNIVERSITY AGAIN

Thanks to Bletchley Park I had made up my mind I wanted an academic career. My idea was that I would study German literature and German history, trying to understand how Hitler had ever been accepted, and to show what alternative, liberal, human tradition could be promoted in future. I was disappointed, as it eventually turned out. Acceptance of Hitler could be explained in thousands of ramifications by historians - there was nothing I could contribute there, except, much later, a very small book for schools, setting out the basic outline. My most popular book, that was, selling far more copies than anything literary, except perhaps the book on Brecht, which again had a political content. A liberal, humane tradition might have begun with Lessing, in the mid-eighteenth century, but Lessing had no heirs, at any rate so far as that kind of tradition was concerned. Over the years I saw one possible contender for it after another disappear from my list, not even Thomas Mann, the self-appointed leader of literary opposition to Hitler, really stood for what I was searching after. It was not until I retired that I began to realise what contribution to Hitler's anti-Semitism could be attributed to the Christian Gospels. My efforts at demonstrating that had not been accepted by any publisher by 2006.



*Hartington Grove Cambridge, 1951*

For the time being, in the immediate post-war years, I had to qualify for a university job, which I did by an introspective route that took me away from too much pondering on the Bomb, and grounded me in an esoteric knowledge - if you can call it that - which has oddly

enough stood me in good stead, looking at the long run. In 1946 it could never have seemed so. The colourful, individualistic, far from academic Professor of German at Cambridge, Elsie Butler, insisted on my taking as the title of my Ph.D. thesis 'The importance of Goethe's scientific writings for *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*'. I had abandoned all idea of completing my B.A. course, and was allowed to count my military service as equivalent to one year's residence at Cambridge. But attempting this Ph.D. topic was worse even than trying to get back into the habit of writing an essay or two a week on a different subject. The *Wanderjahre*, a work of Goethe's old age, was infinitely boring, and had no connection I could see with his scientific writings. Gradually, with the connivance of Humphry Trevelyan, now my research supervisor, I dropped all concern with Wilhelm Meister, and was drawn into tracing the connection between Goethe's science and his early studies of alchemy. That could be pretty boring too. I would order up from the British Museum Library alchemical books which I knew Goethe had read, sit under that huge dome watching the cranky woman who wore knitted woollen shorts, reminding myself which place Karl Marx had sat in, turning over dull pages that promised to reveal to me the true names of Philosophical Mercury and Philosophical Sulphur, the genuine recipe for making the Philosophers' Stone, and dash out every hour, on the hour, to sit on the steps outside and drag at a cigarette. I would have been driven to doing something quite different, if there hadn't been every now and then a nugget to take home, a quotation that fitted the argument I was building, a parallel between some alchemical reference and something Goethe had said. The exhilarating part came when I started to write up my results, after only a couple of years. Pat and I had a race, to see whose baby would be born first, John or my thesis, and it was a tie, in March 1948, except that I had to revise, which she couldn't. I marvelled at the way all my thoughts over all that period assembled themselves in order, and began to fill page after page. It was as though I had one immensely long sentence to write, and it all came out unwinding itself for months and months, each quotation slotting into position as I needed it, chapters rounding themselves off, the whole thing giving me a wonderful sense of logical progression, as though it were being written by somebody not me at all. One chapter in particular impressed me, when I suddenly saw my way to writing about an obscure work of Goethe's, his Märchen or so-called fairy-tale (but there were no fairies in it). The alchemical associations struck me in the early evening, and I sat up all night, till I had rounded it all off - just like Kafka writing *The Judgment*, it only now occurs to me. There was something akin to truly creative writing in all this, though.

I never crossed the line and wrote novels or poetry of my own. Translation was the nearest I ever came to that kind of creation, and I was no good at it - all my translations are destroyed. With all that, I was often depressed. Any research student in the arts has a lonely

life, spends hours and hours reading books uninteresting to him in themselves, has little contact with others in the same field. I was lucky to be married. Pat learned more about alchemy and Goethe than she ever wanted to know, though she was trying to qualify for a Master's degree in Education on her own account.



*Celebrating John's arrival with the Trevelyans*

It was lucky too, that Humphry and his wife Molly invited us almost every Sunday to lunch at their huge house in Trumpington. We would cycle over and be welcomed by Molly's wonderful hospitality, and sit down to her almost raw roast beef, giant baked potatoes, plentiful boiled vegetables, while my nose would run and I would hope she would shut the doors on the cold winter days when the health-bringing winds swept through the house. Molly was a New Englander, and a bit of a backwoods woman. All the family, all five children, seemed to me to be immune to my soft-living reactions to their hardy conditions. But they were all so welcoming, and we enjoyed not only being with them in the rambling roomy house, but also going over of an evening to sing rounds and catches and madrigals. Humphry seldom touched the rudder; I suppose he could see I was managing well enough. But he was so modestly friendly, unassuming, and careless of any academic pretentiousness, I have been influenced by him ever since. I learned from him, from his general ways, not to want to sit on committees or be a professor or to adhere to any particular school of thought at all closely. I think I also learned not to rate German literature very highly, because although he was seldom critical, I felt he had lost interest long ago. His learned book on Goethe and the Greeks had been published before the war, but he never wrote another, or even wrote a learned article. He translated wonderfully well some plays by Kleist, some libretti for Schubert operas, and that was what engaged him: something that

could be performed, with live people. German literature, but much more literary criticism, was a dead field for him. When he died, still quite young, in 196(4?), he had few interests left outside wood engraving, singing, country life. When I told him once how depressed I was, he said he was depressed himself, and couldn't help me, but he did, by a strength of personality that survived his worst despairing.

Elsie Butler was delighted when she heard about the change in my thesis, made, thanks to Humphry's indifference to the rules, without reference to her at all,. No wounded feelings for her, despite her firm insistence at the outset on exactly what I was supposed to do. But she was unusual in those days, just after 1945, in being a professor at all. Few women were. And Elsie was a witty, humorous, lively woman, who wrote more books than any other holder of the Beit chair ever has. She would affect feminine incapacity, saying at departmental meetings she couldn't understand what some university regulation meant, and appealing to some male authority round the table for help. But her liking for play-acting always made her sincerity in this look doubtful. She would appear at parties wearing a long skirt and a 1920s-style fillet round her white hair, with a cigarette in a holder twelve inches long, also 1920-ish, though this was not as affected as it may sound. She came wearing her choicest dress to our small house when I invited her to dinner, probably expecting several other guests to be present, but accepted our inadequacies graciously. I knew nothing about wine, but had been told women liked Madeira, so I bought that for the meal, and she declared Madeira was her favourite drink, which I later doubted, seeing how little Madeira was ever drunk in Cambridge. By reputation, however, she was a woman of mystery, a Buddhist priestess, it was said, if any such thing exists, and by her own confession she was attracted by black magic and the occult, which was almost as good. In her very funny autobiography, *Paper Boats*, she describes not only her days as a Red Cross nurse in the Crimea, her rebellious antics as a young Fellow of Newnham, her encounter with the ghost of the Prince von Ptickler-Muskau, about whom she was writing her doctoral thesis (she had to write about a man with a name like that, she said), but also her confrontations with the notorious black magician Alastair Crowley, and her vision of the prophet Ezekiel standing at the foot of her bed. She played her Irish ancestry for all it was worth, and it may after all have something to do with her fascination with myth, her three-volume study of Faust-legend. By turning to an occult field, alchemy, I had all innocently done exactly the right thing to gain her favour. Meeting me on Market Hill one day she sweetly asked if I had spent any time in Germany since the war. I should do that, she said, if I wanted a career in German, and not long after she arranged for me to have a scholarship awarded by the city council of Zurich. I felt she had her eye on me, and sure enough, a year or so later, in 1949, she offered me an assistant lectureship. Harold Knight of Trinity was convinced, I felt afterwards,

that I had calculated my chances too cunningly. He would stalk past me with his nose in the air well above my head, disdain all over his face. But he was a proud man, a Trinity man, and a bold one for those days, openly showing his love for the beautiful Swedish lecturer Brita Mortensen, regardless of his wife, and he was a tragic man too. When Brita was killed in a car accident he withdrew even more from the rest of us, and disappeared from his yacht off the coast of Scotland, perhaps having drowned himself. I may have misread him so far as his opinion of me was concerned.

The chances of going to Germany while still a research student were slim, for obvious reasons. Pat and I had invited two German prisoners of war to have Sunday tea in our house in 1947-8, since they were allowed out of their camp at Trumpington one day a week. It was one way of making contact again. (And, incidentally, I still have a theatre programme of a performance of Goethe's *Iphigeneia* at the A.D.C. Theatre in which Orestes was played by Erich Heller, probably the most distinguished 'Germanist' of my time, and the three other male parts by P.W.'s. The lead was taken by Hjördis Roubiczek, of whom more later.) But the contacts did not hold, and even if they had, I would have had difficulty in getting permission to live in occupied Germany. So the offer of a semester at Zurich was welcome. Pat had to stay in Cambridge, there was no grant for her.



## SWITZERLAND

I was lonely in Zurich, partly because we had to be separated again, partly because I saw Mathilde Rosenthal of Girton running across a lecture-room in sheer delight at seeing the Alps far off, covered in snow, and was instantly smitten, only to hear from her a few days later that she had just agreed to marry a businessman, Paul Strimpel. Saved again, I wrote to Pat as I had written about Phyllis, and got a furious answer. Not surprisingly. I did at least become so much the friend of both Paul and Mathilde later on, that I saw her, and less often him, whenever they were back from India or Italy, where Paul bought and sold cotton waste. At the time, general frustration led to my smoking endless cigarettes in my room at Zollikon, filling with smoke the whole house to the distress of my generous hosts. But no, I had a good time in Zürich, especially because of the generosity of Emil Staiger, the author of the best book on Goethe to be written after the war. Staiger was unusual among the notoriously inaccessible professors of German either in Germany or in Switzerland. His so-called seminars were attended by ten or twenty times the usual numbers, and he hired a room in a restaurant by the Limmatquai where for the price of a cup of coffee you could sit at a table with him. Too many did this, but he at least had the chance of meeting criticism and speaking off the record. When I asked him if he would write a reference asked for by the awarders of my scholarship, he took the opportunity of making more than a formal report, and offered to read a piece of mine about Goethe and speak to me privately. Even when I arrived at his flat at half past two, when he had said 'halb zwei', which I knew perfectly well meant half past one, he was unruffled. True, he didn't think much of what I had put - I still hear him saying 'Ich glaub's Ihnen nicht', 'I don't believe you', thanks to which I cut that section out of my thesis, but who else in his field would have apologised later for being 'schnöde', and hurting my feelings? When he came to Cambridge to lecture, in the early 1950s, he came to our terrace house and even admired the blue gloss paint I had used all over the old wallpaper. 'Keine Wolken', he said - I hadn't left any blotches, though he can't have liked the effect. He was the one post-war writer on German literature who had seriously critical things to say, and whom I could recommend with few reservations to my undergraduates. So my first stay in Switzerland, despite a boring attempt at skiing where there were no learners' slopes, high on Piz Sol at the Zurich Studentenhütte, was a success.

It also led to my second stay, after Henry Liedeker of Basle had come over to Zürich and offered me a job from October 1948 as English lecturer at the university there. This time Pat was able to come too. We arrived at Basle station with luggage piled high, John on my back, and no certificate - nobody had told us we needed one - to say which of our belongings had been in our possession for more than six months. How long we would stay

we didn't know, maybe for ever, and I wasn't encouraged though amused when the Swiss customs officer replied to my question whether the certificate could be forgotten, with 'Jo, dos is a bitzeli a kitzeligi froog'. Ticklish question or not, his reply was said in such a kind way, and the sound of it was so comical, that I took heart. Liedeke saved us anyway, and we had a year in Basle, mostly spent in trying to make enough to live on, since the lectorship was scaled for a single man, and I had Pat and John to pay for. I taught in every 'Gymnasium' in the town, at the Commercial School, the Basle Mission, and at evening classes in Liestal, the capital of the canton Baseland, as well as in my regular stint at the university, taking English at every lesson, and rarely hearing any High German. So my ability and willingness to speak German has always had to be cranked up. My accent is perfect, if unplaceable, but I never drop into speaking German as though it were my native language, much as I would like to. Germans often think I am German, but the inner conviction that I am speaking as they do is lacking.

We spent most of 1948-9 in a flat at Binningen, just outside the canton Baselstadt, looking down a hillside covered in cherry trees, on the fringe of vast cherry orchards where in summer at a farm you could for one franc be given a pile of cherries and eat your fill. It was paradise after war-time England; Pat even had to object to people throwing oranges, a luxury for us, during a Shrovetide festival. The Swiss no more realised how well off they were, compared with us, than we do in the twenty-first century, comparing ourselves with the 'Third' World. They were on the defensive, it's true, about their life of security during the war. Some German-speaking Swiss had been more in favour of the German rebirth under the Nazis than they now cared to remember. During the war, Hitler had been allowed to send troops and arms through the Swiss tunnels to Italy, a concession made in the knowledge that the tunnels could be blown up if necessary, but in the hope that this would be a last resort, a trump card that could be played indefinitely, so long as Hitler saw where the danger-line ran.

Our landlord, Herr Schloeth, in whose house we lived, would tell us of the bombs that had nearly been dropped on Basle through some mistake of Allied bombers aiming for German targets just over the Rhine. He showed his helmet and rifle, which he still had to be ready to use, like all Swiss men of military age. But he made no great fuss about all that. More to his liking were conversations about theology, or rather friendly attempts at converting me to the beliefs of the Oxford Group, of which he was a member. He had offered us a flat on the misunderstanding, originating from Pat's father, who was influential in the Group, that I was a student of theology at the university. Learning I wasn't, he made no bones about it, except to take me for Sunday morning walks in the woods, always beginning

to try converting me as we started back for home. We were on good terms with all the family, which was very well off by our standards. Frau Schloeth helped Pat with her mothering problems, and let her use the huge laundry for once-a-month laundering, for which she needed a German 'daily', who would shout 'Fest!' ('Hold on!') as she tugged the sheets out of Pat's hands on to the grass. The elder son, Robi, would offer me pure alcohol taken from his university laboratory, flavoured to resemble various liqueurs, which I declined. Through him we learned a bit about Swiss-German relations, for he was a member of a 'Burschenschaft' or student union of a kind that had been fostered by the Nazis but was prohibited in Germany after 1945. When he came home one morning with his cheeks slashed by a sabre, after a German-style 'Mensur' duel in the woods, attended by a Swiss member of parliament, his mother was horrified, and we also saw how close to Germany some Swiss must have been, in pre-war times. I had myself belonged to a 'Burschenschaft' while in Zurich. But they had been 'nichtschiessend', non-duelling, and had met to drink beer and sing old-fashioned student songs. I had felt like an embarrassed mass-observer at their initiation ceremonies, which required the newcomer, though not me, to stand on a chair with his trousers down, reciting a rude poem of his own invention. Every so often the President would declare 'Foxes' Republic', at which the foxes, or freshmen, would try to keep order while the rest, including the old members, Zurich businessmen who still gave their support, bucketed round the pub riding their chairs backwards and chanting 'Wir fahren Scheisse'. At the annual meeting of the student club in the Basle Casino top-booted students wearing pillboxes on their heads would snap heels together and challenge someone across the hall to down a litre at one go. But these were scenes not very different from what you might have seen at an English rugby club, to judge by my brief experience of Emanuel School's old members. I would not have joined if I hadn't supposed the 'Singstudenten' were going to perform Beethoven and Bach, like the Cambridge University Musical Society to whose chorus I had belonged. Anyway I enjoyed the hearty singing, even as I laughed at myself swinging through the streets with the rest of them in files, thumping the air with our 'Hi-dee's' and 'Hi-da's'. Robi Schloeth with his face-slashing amusements was a bit more difficult to get on with. Robi's younger brother was quite a lot younger than us, now nearing our thirties. He was barely twenty, a modest, good-looking chap whom Pat found very attractive. Such was our way of looking at things in those days, I actually encouraged her in this. We sat with Andreas for an hour or more in our flat one evening, while Pat told him how much she wanted to go out with him and I urged him to agree, because I wouldn't mind in the slightest. We had read a lot of William Blake at that time, and would quote him to Swiss friends on the lust of the goat being the bounty of God. But Andreas would not go along with our proposal, and I have never known Pat feel the same way about any man again.

We were not to stay much longer in the Schloeth's house. Elsie Butler was delighted with my thesis, and after only nine months we were packing to go home again. I had begun to recover from our disastrous start in Basle, when I had to borrow to get by, so we decided to blow all our Swiss francs on a month in the Bernese Oberland before we returned. That made a triumphant end to our stay, not only because of the mountains, but because of the succulent Emmental cheese and fresh eggs we would take on our picnics, with wonderful breads of all kinds. Pat's great friend Nicky Coward joined us for part of the time. It was the longest holiday we ever had in our lives, and one of the best.

## LECTURER

There was no difficulty about where we were going to live in Cambridge. We had bought a small house in 1946 and let it for the year we were away to a married student. It was an inauspicious year, all the same. Because the colleges at that time decided to which lecturer in languages they would send their students, and I was unknown, only one or two came to my prose and translation classes, and I was not asked by the Department of German to give lectures on literature. It took a year or two to put that right; meanwhile I launched into a close study of Rilke's introspective Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, which depressed me more and more, as Kafka was to do later. The start of the Korean war in 1950 made things worse. My jubilation in 1945 was already moderated by the Bomb and the 'cold war' with the USSR; now the prospect of war between China and the U.S.A. left me in poor spirits. I would weep for no immediately obvious reason, even feel unable to walk a few yards. When Sue was born in August 1950 I had her name registered as Susan Hope, because, I told Pat, I hadn't any hope of my own. She was angry, saying I had no idea of the labour pains she had had, and insisted I changed the name to Susan Margaret, which it now is, though one birth certificate still has the first choice of names.

It was 'all in the mind'. How embarrassed I was when I had asked Dr Bevan to call, as I couldn't get to his surgery, and he walked in to find me sitting in the living-room with Ken and Gamby Quinn. 'Which is the patient?' was all he wanted to know, though he remained professionally courteous. Yet the crippling effect of depression needed more than a word or two of encouragement. After some long while I asked for an appointment at Addenbrooke's Hospital, where I explained to a doctor that I had come in a taxi because I couldn't manage on foot for the couple of miles between there and our house in Hartington Grove. What was my work he said. It was about the symbolism of the blood in Rilke, I said, dejectedly, and thought I could hear incredulity in his voice as he asked me to say it again. But he didn't listen long before advising me to go home and ignore my symptoms. I was the incredulous one this time. Ignore them? Yes, he said, and walk home, no taxi needed in your case. It's hard to realise now how absolutely impossible that seemed. I left the hospital deliberately placing one foot in front of the other, dragging the other after it, and so inch by inch all the way back. To my amazement I reached home at last, and it did me some good to realise I had done that. But it was a long time before I was truly confident.

A condition like that can be completely convincing at one moment, and absent the next. I had a daunting experience when I read a paper on Ibsen and alchemy to the university Modern Language society, and deservedly had it shot down by Brian Downs. I deceived myself into thinking I could extend what I had said about Goethe to Ibsen as well.

But I got over that, and went on to learn some Norwegian, helped, it's true, by the intensely attractive Hanne Ritter, widow of a Resistance fighter. I also launched out on what I hoped would be a career in broadcasting, with a Third Programme talk on C.G. Jung, where my acquaintance with alchemy was more to the point. And somehow I thought I could cope with a little social work too.

There was a boys' club at York Street, off East Road, which in the early 1950s was helped by teachers and university students in many ways. Classes in fencing, boxing, drawing and painting, carpentry, opportunities for football, netball, hockey, badminton, swimming, were offered, and there happened to be a need for help with a drama group, which I took on. There were a dozen or more teenagers, boys and girls, all very keen, who met once a week to read a play. Before long I had got them to the point of entering a competition for amateur groups at the A.D.C. Theatre, which after a first failure they won, at least they got through to the second round, where they were defeated. I was tremendously proud of my little lot, who all came from schools where there was little to encourage them to act in plays, whereas the groups who eventually beat them had had much greater opportunities. A catastrophe then hit them that was significant for the times generally. Not long after our success the education authority decreed that in future nobody was to be excluded from the club on any account. Till then, the club leader had had complete control. Troublemakers and absentees knew they would not remain members for long. With this decree, intended to overcome prejudices that no doubt did exist, chaos came. Small gangs joined us, and ruined one class after another. My drama group was made up of more intellectual teenagers than were found in other groups: they melted away, as it became impossible even to read plays, let alone act. Soon they had all left, and I would go to the club to find a room overheated with a red-hot iron stove in the middle, the 'class' huddled round it, and a gramophone thudding out a relentless rhythm: 'Zambezi, Zambezi, Zambezi in Africa', or some equally meaningless words repeated over and over and over again. Pupil power had come to stay. A while later the leader was thrown in the swimming bath during a competition, all for a joke, wearing his best suit. Later still he was banged on the head with the butt of a pistol. The club folded up, and I made no effort to find another like it. Instead, I began producing an annual play in German, but that is a long story that can wait a moment.' There were good grounds, so far, for saying 'more means worse'.

Depressions continued despite all this activity. Humph and Moll offered me a strip of their garden for growing vegetables - sensibly, since I spent most of my time on less practical matters. But I never took to it, and never have, for all my later intellectual interests in gardens. (Not quite true - in my 70s I gardened quite a bit.) Humphry's cousin Kitty

Trevelyan, a visionary woman with great faith in nature cures, got me to do the washing up, associating the cleaning of the dishes with the cleaning of my psyche. I have a recollection of lying on the grass in the sun in Humphry's garden, half asleep, and of her throwing a daisy chain over me, as though casting a spell. But much as I liked her I was impervious to all that kind of thing, and moped as before - or rather 'groobled', as I used to say, making an English word out of the German 'grübeln'. I felt it was a German thing to do.

By 1954 I had come through my first three years as an assistant lecturer and been reappointed for another two, which were almost up, though I didn't give much thought to that. It was Pat who wrote to Walter Bruford, Elsie's successor, to know whether I was going to be reappointed a second time. Myself, I was too taken up with the lectures I was now allowed to give, in addition to the weekly classes in prose and translation. There had been nobody interested in the 'modern' period, from 1918 onwards, so I had begun lecturing on the Expressionists, an often frenzied group of writers who were no medicine for my depressed state. This had led me to Kafka, on whom I was due to give a course in October 1954, so the end of the Easter Term, late May early June, when exams were in progress, found me deep in *The Castle*, as obscure a work as any Kafka wrote.



## KAFKA

It is always right to enter a poem or a novel without reservations, to let the experience take you where it does, and only afterwards take stock of where you are. With my talent for acting, the first part of that sequence, identifying myself with the part so to speak, has always come easily. The second has perhaps turned too readily into a dislike of where I found myself, and so into negative criticism. With Kafka, however, the second part was not entered for a long while. I experienced *The Castle* as Kafka apparently expected me to, entirely from the viewpoint of the central character, Joseph Kafka. His attempt at penetrating to the heart of the castle organisation, at meeting its chief officer Kianim, who so much resembles not only Kafka's own father but also some kind of divinity, at discovering his own identity, whether he is or is not the land-surveyor specially summoned and then ignored or forgotten - all this became my own experience, with the strangest results. For weeks on end I was in a daze, so far as all external affairs were concerned. I felt, like so many other people, that I had come across a key to the whole thing, a key of such significance that I was afraid I might at any moment be run over by a bus and thus fail to deliver my message to the whole world that must be anxiously waiting for it. In a way, as I now see, I was 'finding the Philosophers' Stone' - it must have been because of some impulse in that direction that I had found myself studying alchemy a few years before, and in its turn that impulse reverberated from the impulse I had had as an undergraduate before the war, to read the works of Jacob Boehme, who wrote mystical treatises in alchemical language, and whom I had now read in some detail. By solving the mystery of Kafka's inability to enter the Castle and confront its top official 'face to face', I had solved a lot of other things too. I had understood *King Lear*, I said to myself, and various other masterpieces. I went about hearing strange significance in ordinary words. 'I must get to Jesus', I said, meaning the college, where I had to attend an examiners' meeting, and half-jokingly, but only half, thought that must be a message from the unconscious. I began conversing in an inner dialogue with somebody I called Jeremy, though I knew the first two letters were in the name of Jesus too. One of my pupils, Stan Craven, heard of the state I was in - I told him something about it, but nobody else, except Pat - and left after supervision saying 'Work out your salvation with diligence' - a quotation from T.S. Eliot quoting the Buddha, I think. All this turmoil went on for several weeks. The absurdity was that the whole thrust of my argument - which I had written down in chapter-form as though for a book - was that Kafka was much better in mind and body when he stopped trying to get into the Castle, when he accepted his human condition and was prepared for death without undue qualms. I saw the novel as a rejection of all the great philosophers, especially German ones, who had claimed to get at the very heart of things - Hegel and Schopenhauer, in particular, but alchemists and Boehme as well. Yet I was still as



nervous about remaining alive to say this as if I had had an equally profound insight into the essence of reality.

Pat had listened without saying much. She had been a Christian of the Student Christian Movement kind before I met her, and we had argued about it until she gave up, at least to the extent of not getting married in church, not going to church services, having few contacts with Christian people as such. For fifteen years we had hardly mentioned religion, the children were not christened, we said no grace before meals, at most we read C.S. Lewis, whose *Screwtape Letters* impressed me, and discussed the 'Grand Inquisitor' story in the *Brothers Karamazov* - a few incidental encounters like that. I expect there were more that I don't remember. During this six- or seven-week turmoil, in which, it's true, I myself began talking vaguely about Jesus, Pat seemed to go back, not very strongly, to her old beliefs from the time before we met. At all events she suggested I should go and see Hugh Montefiore, later Bishop of Birmingham, who was at that time Principal or Vice-Principal of Westminster (Theological) College in Jesus Lane. Hugh was by origin a Jew, who had had a profound conversion experience while at school, strong enough in its effects to persuade him to ask for ordination. After listening to me for an hour or so he wrote to me a long letter saying that what I was going through was also a conversion experience, and recommending various books I might read. By this time I was blank, exhausted, not knowing what to make of myself. For the last year I had been having fits of asthma, set off by Sue's whooping-cough, but latent in the hay fever I had had from early childhood. This added to my sense of helplessness, since the drugs available then were slow-working and short-lasting: on cold days I couldn't walk a quarter of a mile without having to stop and sit down. So I accepted Hugh's kind advice and began attending Church of England services at Great St Mary's. I was C. of E. if anything, and had been from the time I first became a choirboy until not long after my voice broke. But I felt no great conviction, it was Hugh who had the conviction, and I was merely shadow-boxing. I had learned to swim by making the right strokes with my arms while trailing one leg on the bottom. Maybe my foot would come off the bottom without my realising it, as it had done in the bath, and I would find myself afloat.

A year or two passed. Flamboyant Mervyn Stockwood was now Vicar of Great St Mary's, notoriously waving a beer-bottle in the vestry, putting soot on the congregation's faces on Good Friday, dashing from the altar down the nave in a dramatised show of grief. His theology was liberal, his manners forthright and outspoken, and he was a declared epicure. When we invited him home to lunch he observed it was usual to provide a bottle of wine to entertain the visiting priest, which we hadn't thought of as at the time we drank practically no wine, beer or spirits. Later I realised what a disappointment we must have

been; he loved his glass, and like Hugh Montefiore could say that Jesus was a man who enjoyed partygoing. I was a disappointment to him myself, perhaps, in another way. He was as orthodox as could be in what might be called his instruction of me, lending me a large commentary on the Thirty-nine Articles which every Anglican priest is supposed to subscribe to, though they notoriously didn't, and hadn't done for a long time. But I also read William Temple, Karl Barth, and even gave German lessons to a Ph.D. student who wanted to read Gogarten, whose Teutonic convolutions were unintelligible even in the original. These and many others were difficult going. I didn't feel I was getting anywhere, and found it more and more difficult, for instance, to join in the rollicking musical setting of the Creed that Mervyn had chosen: 'I believe in 0-one God, tee tum titi tum tum tah tum.' Nothing jelled, yet there was nothing else in sight, I still had depressions and asthma, still felt quite blank. Would I like to be confirmed, Mervyn asked. Well, maybe yes, so I went with the younger people to confirmation classes and felt even less sure of anything. Still, having got into the run I was carried along towards Confirmation Day, when we would kneel in front of the Bishop of Ely and become fully-fledged Christians. As it drew nearer I often thought of dropping out. Nothing made sense, inside or outside the Church, but in the end that was just it - the Church was at least a place where I could go on trying to swim, whereas outside there was not even a bath. So I went on the appointed day, knelt in the pew and waited for the ceremony to begin. As I waited, reluctance grew: why commit myself to something I didn't believe? I was on the point of leaving when I found myself praying that if God had any will that I should be a Christian he should make me one, I was a blank sheet for him to write on, but if that wasn't his will, or if he was no-one anyway, I would be content with a different outcome. With that prayer just said, I knelt before the Bishop.

When Mervyn asked me some months later, how I was getting on, I said, as if he were a hospital doctor, 'as well as can be expected'. Not much of an answer. But by this time Pat too had undergone a conversion experience. Just what it was like she has never said, except that it was very powerful, a meeting with the Almighty about which she could have no possible doubt. She has sometime spoken about her father in connection with it - he was a man of periodic faith, but her relations with him were always badly affected by his leaving her mother and her when she was six - and sometime hinted at an unusual loving relationship. This must have been a year or two after my own much more ambiguous upset, and might have been expected to confirm it, to push me further into the Church. Certainly we tried for that. John and Sue were christened at last (in 1956 or 1957 I think) and we repeated our marriage vows, or rather said the Christian vows for the first time, in a short service conducted privately by Hugh Montefiore. But the change in me never came about. I would come home from Sunday morning service feeling sick with untruth. The Gospel no longer

had any conceivable meaning for me. The story of redemption was impossible, when the earth had existed for so many thousands of millions of years, men for only several hundred thousand, so that the delay in sending a deliverer in Christ was unintelligible. Equally impossible to fathom was the way in which Christ was supposed to have delivered us. The doctrine of Atonement was not even popular with believers, and even if Christ had risen from the dead, what did that mean for the rest of mankind? We were clearly not going to be resurrected in the same way, as whole bodies, or if we were, we would need to have bodies adaptable to suit various ages at which people would have known us. The miracles, supposedly the proof of Christ's majesty and power, were sometimes ridiculous, like the ones with the fig-tree and the Gadarene swine, and gentle, loving Jesus looked a different man entirely when he threatened death and damnation to all who did not believe in his wonder-working powers.

These are not new objections, nor are they all I had in mind. Some Christians have felt able to meet them or to continue claiming themselves Christians even while not meeting them. There are Christians who call themselves atheists. This paradox was too much for me. I was making myself ill, trying to cope with doubts I had already had before I was confirmed, which were now not so much doubts as disbeliefs. I felt increasingly that my prayer had led to this result. It had not been answered, since I couldn't conceive of an answer outside myself, but my own answer was clear. I stopped going, stopped trying to get into the Castle. That has left me with a constant wish, kept alive by Pat, to see whether someone else's experience differs from mine in a way that would convince me. But at least I can say, when the old argument is raised, 'you haven't allowed yourself the chance of knowing what Christianity is really like - give up everything and a new life truly begins', that I came as near giving up everything as I'm ever likely to, until, that is, I actually die, and no new life in a Christian sense followed.

Pat and I were now in an odd situation. She had followed me into the church, at least in point of time, and could hardly trot out again on account of my backsliding. She became more and more convinced, urged me more and more often to come back and join her, would speak enviously of wives who had bishops or even ordinary clergy as husbands - that would have given a joint purpose to everything we both did, and here I was, ratting on her. There was nothing I could do, or would do, even when she said she would not share my bed any more, so long as I remained outside the church. She didn't mean that with total seriousness, I was able to discover, but she did speak of the Almighty as though he were her real husband, and from the age of forty onwards we had almost no love-making. Her firmness was made more firm by the simple disinclination of both John and Sue to have anything to

do with Christian belief, from their childhood till now. They both commit themselves to helping other people through education, and both rightly see that as their mother's inheritance rather than mine (I am the academic one), but religion is a closed door. Pat has gradually accepted that, and goes to church on her own without the outbursts of anger that for some years used to be my Sunday diet. 'Bloody Sunday' we used to call it, but not any longer.



*John and Sue's christening 1956*

The unshakeable conviction survived, for me, that I had interpreted Kafka rightly. Not just made an interpretation that might interest some people, but absolutely rightly, so rightly that anyone reading me would, if he was being fair, have to agree. I had some support in that view, though probably not intended in such absolute terms, from Harold Mason, one of the editors of the critical periodical *Scrutiny* made famous by F.R. Leavis. On Harold's advice I submitted the manuscript of my interpretation to the Cambridge University Press to whom I felt a debt of gratitude for printing my Ph.D. thesis (under the title *Goethe the Alchemist*). With Elsie Butler's support that had had a small success, with many respectful and some admiring reviews, including one by Emil Staiger. I now felt, odd as it may sound, that I could reward the Press by offering them *Kafka's Castle* as it came to be called, and was delighted when Oscar Watson accepted it, though it was so short he asked for a few more pages on *The Trial*. I am sorry now that I provided these: they were not part of the original experience and haven't the same flow. But this book also was well received in many countries. For me, however, that success was more than it might have seemed. In my eyes I had established that I was not out of my mind, or at any rate not seriously subjective, at the troublesome time when I wrote it. Publication and mainly approving reviews were a guarantee, in a way, of my

sanity. But it took fifteen or twenty years before I could persuade myself that there were so much as minor faults in the book. I still hold by the main case I put, but with time I have become more willing to see it out there, as one contribution among others, and I don't feel as I used to, that my sanity would be at stake if anyone showed up serious flaws in it.

## GODOT

The same is true of the broadcast talk I gave in 1956, interpreting Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. I saw this play at one of the early performances at the Criterion, essentially the same as the first performance. It had been screamingly funny, particularly Lucky's long speech interspersed with 'in spite of the tennis', 'but time will tell and who can doubt it', which had me helplessly grabbing the seat in front as I used to do as a boy, watching a Marx Brothers film. Shortly afterwards the same production with the same cast, all except one, came to the Cambridge Arts Theatre, where I saw it again, this time in utter silence. The plight of Didi and Gogo in their almost deserted spot, waiting for a Godot who never appeared but always promised to appear next day, seemed, perhaps, more meaningful to the Cambridge audience, or maybe they were less inclined to see the funny side. As I left the Arts I suddenly saw a solution rather as I had seen one for *The Castle*, feeling an impulse to get it down on paper as fast as possible, though no longer with such a sense of apocalyptic urgency. I dropped it in on Henry Chadwick, professor of theology at that time, and received a noncommittal answer. But I knew I had it right, and was gratified again when the BBC, this time, accepted my twenty-minute script with some enthusiasm. The gist of what I said is interesting still, as it is in tune with several other interpretations I have made of quite different works. In brief, I maintained that Didi and Gogo were wrong to suppose that Godot never came. Every day or at least on the two repetitive days on which we saw them in the play, the brutal, burly, imperious Pozzo turned up, looking in the Criterion production like Alice in Wonderland's Duchess, and with him came the miserable, tongue-tied, despairing Lucky with a rope round his neck. Pozzo was mistaken for Godot as soon as he arrived, and that, I said, was who he was. Instead of moaning about their isolation and terrible suffering, Didi and Gogo might greet this horrible pair as gods needing their love - there was no absence to complain of, they were rewarded every day with as much of Godot as they were likely to see, at least for now.

Harold Mason, on seeing the draft, gave me a rough time. Did I really think Beckett would have written such a patently negative play with so positive a meaning in mind? His scepticism felt like a knife in my chest, I had a physical pain there. But I went on, having agreed to give the talk, badly wanting to tell people not to agree with me. There was little reaction, though I did receive one poison-pen letter from Disgusted, Tunbridge Wells. Yet looking back after thirty years it seemed not such a bad talk to have given. What Beckett 'meant', if anything, is beside the point. As Lawrence said, 'Never trust the author, trust the work'. To me the work said exactly what was published in *The Listener*, and apart from the reference to Christ in it I still stood by it in 2006, by which time I was much less paradoxical,

until I revised what I said. Interpreting Godot in that way did not have to involve believing in God. If anything it treated the play as a satire on those who went on waiting for what could never happen, for the Messiah, the ultimate revelation, the promised arrival, whatever you chose to call it. Abandoning efforts to enter Joseph Kafka's castle was in the same general trend: Godot would never come, except that he came every day, crying out for mercy, and the Castle would never be entered, although as somebody in the novel said, to be in the Village was in a sense to be already in the Castle. I was only echoing a move of the times, shown also in my college theological discussion group, run by Howard Root, the Dean. Howard invited me to join in from 1959 or 1960 onwards, by which time the only way I could do that was, in his terms, as Devil's Advocate. The meetings led at first to some lively ding-dongs, fundamentalists versus liberals, CICCUC against S.C.M., Nonconformists versus Anglicans. Howard was challenged by somebody to say if he would consider anything at all as proof against God's existence or benevolence, to which he replied no. Yet he was more for me than he was for the fundamentalists, and his desire for an ecumenical church was so much part of him that after being sent as the Archbishop of Canterbury's representative or reporter to Vatican II he saw reconciliation or union or collaboration with the Roman Catholic Church as his true mission. The theological society, however, dwindled in interest. Where undergraduates had read papers of a strictly theological kind, by the early 1960s they were increasingly offering titles such as 'My experience last vac as a nursing orderly', 'Working with West Indians', and treating of similar social issues. By the time Don Cupitt arrived, replacing Howard, there was no theology left, and the society fizzled out. There is no theological discussion group for members of the College in general now, though fundamentalism has been strong enough to cause some chaplains alarm.

## PRODUCER AND ACTOR

While all these inward changes had been going on I had taken a good many parts in plays, relieved at not having to be the one self all the time. At first, after the collapse of the Youth Club, or perhaps alongside it, I launched into producing plays in German. There was a touch of the Sir Galahad about that, as so often. In 1951 there had been a performance of Lessing's eighteenth century so-called tragedy, *Emilia Galotti*, that brought the house down. With laughter, and quite rightly: the ending could compete with Bottom's 'Pyramus and Thisbe' for awkward absurdity.



Newly appointed, and with some need to establish myself in academic work if I wanted to make sure of my career, I felt that the German Society could not be left in the lurch. Someone must take the helm, and who else but me? *Goethe the Alchemist* was in proof already, which makes me less Quixotic: publication of that would keep my reputation going for a while. So I chose a short play to start with, Kleist's very funny *The Broken Jug*, though I didn't dare take on the semi-professional stage of the ADC Theatre. The play's shortness was in its favour. I hadn't reckoned with getting scenery made, hiring costumes, designing posters and getting them published, with many etceteras, and ended up doing most of the jobs myself. At almost the last minute the leading player, Hugh Rank, backed



out. So I found myself taking that on too, and much more enjoyable it was, compared with the hard work. There is a bit of Falstaff in the randy old judge, Adam, and I made sure I had real Niersteiner and Limburg cheese, as required by the text - no cold tea and mousetrap - with the result that at a vital moment a great belch billowed out of me, apparently by my own will, and the applause was nearly fantastic. That was enough: I set out next time and every time after that to produce and play the lead, even when we did *Faust*, which for half the time is one long monologue. But Humphry helped me a lot with that.

We worked up quite a large audience each year - 'we' being Humphry, Grace Allen, a research student whom I thanked by failing her thesis, and Pat. After a second year at the Boys' County School in Hills Road we moved back to the ADC where we did Büchner's *Leonce and Lena*, Goethe's *Egmont* and *Faust, Part I*, *The Broken Jug* a second time, *Minna* a second time, and Kleist's *Prince Friedrich von Homburg*. This last was the result of trying to get permission to do Brecht's *Herr Puntilla*, and failing several times. It rather confirmed the reputation of the heirs to Brecht's estate for being difficult that because Peggy Ashcroft had flopped in Brecht's *The Good Woman of Sezuan* in 1956 - just after the Hungarian uprising, which made an author from the Communist country supporting the Soviet Union unpopular - even an amateur company performing in German two years later could not be granted permission to do a different play entirely, for fear of damaging Brecht's reputation further. But that was the answer I got from the International Copyright Bureau after a long time, and by then I had gone to the opposite political extreme, without particularly meaning to. We had auditioned some extraordinarily good actors, including Eleanor Bron and Richard Marquand, who would never have come for anything less than Brecht in the first place. Now I had their good will, I type-cast them for Kleist's patriotic Prussian work. There were a few boos, notably from Geoff Strachan, later the founder of Macmillan's modern drama series. The officers' uniforms cost far too much to hire. But we had made a reputation, and for several more years we could reckon on 800 or 900 spectators at four or five performances a week, the theatre holding just over 200. Some schools travelled a hundred miles or more; we felt we had served them well with a first glimpse of stagings of plays they had read, for in those days schools did read the German classics. They came for a day's fun, of course. One Friday matinee the footman lost his wig and appeared time and again with a tiny pinhead over the huge shoulders of his livery. That went down very well. When I came on late in the play as the Elector of Brandenburg, announcing that I was not the Bey of Tunis, I was surprised to be greeted with just as much laughter as the footman. Were my flies done up? Was the line about the Bey, meaning I was not a tyrant, being misunderstood? I had to repeat it, and the happy gales swept on. Then I saw: the ADC was entirely run by undergraduates, and the brake on the cogwheel under the

stage, holding the safety curtain in position, easily became loose. In fact the curtain was slowly rising and falling a foot or more throughout my speech, as if inviting me to finish and have done with it.

Widening out, I agreed to be Senior Treasurer of the Comedy Theatre Club, an undergraduate society with some town members. This ended in insolvency after a couple of years, and after the fashion of those times, it was up to the Senior Treasurer to make good the debts. It cost me quite a penny, but 'tradesmen', as they used to be called long ago, trusted the university to look after its own. They no longer do. Then came the offers of Serebryakov in *Uncle Vanya*, and in 1960 Petruccio in an open-air performance of the *Shrew* at Trinity Hall. Throwing Katherina around roused me, and I nearly went overboard with her one night. Still the Sir Galahad, I told Pat I'd been tempted: next morning she pulled me out of bed by my hair and got a punch in the ribs from me. Honesty was not the best policy, I was learning. Then there was Bohun in *You Never Can Tell*, and my favourite part, almost, the narrator in Stravinsky's *Soldier Tale*, which I did several times over the years, once at the Lyric, Hammersmith. I had two American roles, in *The Man Who Came to Dinner* and in *Jam a Camera*.

Depressions and asthma were not keeping me back. Yet in 1960 I felt miserable enough to go privately to Christopher Scott, the psychiatrist in Storey's Way, for a whole year. The reason I didn't stay the course longer can be guessed from what happened at our first meeting. Scott was an elderly, dainty man; he told me that as a child he was called 'Mr Velvet Paws'. He didn't quite inspire my confidence in his psychiatry from the beginning. The night before we met I dreamt a dream to end all dreams ever presented for a psychiatrist's analysis. It was a corker. Guillotined pigs came into it, lots of blood, symbols galore that could only be phallic, dark ravines, precipices - I am making some of this up, for I wrote none of it down, and a dream is seldom remembered after waking. But I remembered enough of this one to walk in ironically laughing inwardly at the feast I was just about to offer Scott. I even told him so, and he took it in very good part. Clearly, though, I was not feeling as bad as all that. Scott was an eclectic, he never asked me to lie down and say what came into my head, or test my reactions to questions or books or pictures. I thought at one stage he was telling me I needed a woman, which was partly why Katherina the Shrew was boldly handled, but he indignantly denied this when I reported my derring-do. His method was rather to let me engage in conversations in which he took only a slightly smaller part than I did. At the end of the year I thanked him - sincerely enough - saying I had nothing more wrong with me than a cold in the head would be, physically speaking, and thought I could

manage. My weepiness did in fact clear up after some years, how much because of his treatment I can't say. I thought it was mostly due to pills.

By this time I had begun to think of acting more often in plays that were not in German. I had met Donald Beves of King's, an old stalwart of the Marlowe Dramatic Society, not only as a French lecturer but as the lead in *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. He was even better as Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, in a Fellows' Garden by the Cam, in which I played the delightful part of the Welsh schoolmaster, Sir Hugh Evans. Despite his great bulk he could jack-knife into a basket with GPO on the side - the only one of that size to be had for nothing - and the noise made by a large rock dropped into the river out of sight of the audience as he was supposed to have reached the Thames at Datchet was joyfully received. Donald was a close friend of 'Pop' Prior, widow of Professor Prior, for many years, her tiny body looking incongruous beside his portly trunk and genial red cheeks. 'Pop's Pageants' performed on the Backs for charity, were famous, and so was her increasing vagueness. She would walk on and deliver her lines, only to add 'Oh dear, I should have said that in Act 3', and walk off, or drift into a Chekhov play à propos of nothing with 'Oh dear, the samovar's gone out again'. But Pop was hard as steel underneath, nobody got away with *lèse-majesté* where she was concerned. She and Donald were the centrepiece of Cambridge amateur acting for many years. It was amazing to read in *The Times*, after Donald's death, that he was suspected of being the 'third man', the accomplice of the Soviet spies Philby and Maclean. All *The Times* had to go on, it now seems, was a Cambridge name beginning with B and of five letters. But no crossword solver would have guessed the answer was Blunt.

Donald was popular and loved, not only because he gave many parties in his rooms, at which he would explain his great collection of glass (now in the Fitzwilliam Museum). I saw him bring the house down with a performance of Lance and his dog in *Love's Labour's Lost* - he only had to scratch his head to raise a laugh. Though I couldn't do as well, and wasn't prepared to give up most of my time to the theatre, I auditioned in 1962 for *Macbeth*, and was asked to play Duncan by an undergraduate already famous at that time, Trevor Nunn. Trevor didn't look remotely like the piratical Elizabethan with a pointed beard he became, after a few years as Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Pale, stooping, cigarette hanging off his lower lip, ironically friendly eyes, Ipswich accent (Nunn is an old Ipswich name; he went to school there), he might have been a barrow-boy or a newspaper deliverer. He knew exactly what he wanted. I was not a poor actor by amateur standards, but he would ask me a dozen times to repeat my 'See, see! our honour'd hostess', showing me over and over again exactly what curve my back should make and how I should extend my hand. We simply could not meet his standards, any of us. After rehearsals his 'notes' would

keep us waiting for long periods while each received his praise or blame, and indications of great nicety. It was more than we could cope with. And in this production, at least, a lot of it went for nothing. Having been murdered within half an hour of the start, I wandered round to the back of the auditorium on the night of the performance to discover that everything we said was half drowned in a continual low thudding of drums. I was surprised too to see Lady Macduff 'raped' in full view of the audience. It was early days for that. But it was also the kind of thing that drew attention, and so there was not much surprise when Peter Hall and John Barton, both old members of the Marlowe, called him to Stratford.

Trevor cast me that summer as Dogberry in *Much Ado*, a part I relished. We played it in both Cambridge and Oxford, where I enjoyed an idyllic week using the guest room overlooking the Fellows' Garden at Exeter College - a room once used by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the 'scout' told me with some pride. Breakfast at the huge farmhouse table spread with a white cloth started the day with a rustic atmosphere suited to Dogberry's bucolic ramblings. I relished all of him, but most of all the superb condescension of his lines to Leonato about his own understrapper, constable Verges - 'An honest soul i' faith, sir, by my troth he is, as ever broke bread, but - God is to be worshipped - all men are not alike, alas, good neighbour'. There have often been occasions when I have found myself about to feel just the same way, and quoted the old chump.



*Ron as Dogberry 1962*

For some reason Trevor made me constantly look round at the women, even made some of my exits pursuing them, incongruously for Dogberry himself. He could not have known how I languished in the wings as Rosalind, played by Marion MacNaughton, performed on stage, or how I was caught by some of the other girls when we toured Germany with the same *As You Like It*, glancing down the coach at them by means of the driver's mirror. I can hardly think it was that kind of a reputation that won me the part of Pandarus in the production of *Troilus and Cressida* by Robin Midgley. Whether or not, that was my triumph, my 'Fiend of the Fell'. I felt no desire at all for Cressida, who was not desirable, but I smacked my lips over every word I used in urging her to go to bed with Troilus. A great part, and I felt truly honoured by one small incident at a performance late in the week, when we had got into our stride. At the conclusion of a long list of virtues I was supposed to be admiring I made a slight pause before adding 'and such like'. It was the briefest of indications of how I saw Pandarus's character, but in a flash someone in the audience spotted it and gave a quick rat-tat-tat of applause. Knowing you have spectators like that makes your performance soar away. I hope mine did, in gratitude.

Most of my parts were much smaller: I was type-cast I'm told, not only as Dogberry but also as the down-to-earth shepherd Corin in *the As You Like It* which we took to Germany, and which was highly praised there, though there was too much rough and tumble for my liking - 'Klamauk' one German newspaper rightly called it. But Corin is a great part too, like Sir Hugh Evans, whereas there was not so much to be done with most of Lord Capulet's lines. I may be unfair to them. But what I chiefly remember from that Marlowe Society production of *Romeo and Juliet* is the set, by John Hall of Stratford, a great spiked wall running slantwise across the stage, and how I had to walk along the top of it every night. (It was an obtrusive wall, since Romeo had to climb down from it, not up, to reach what should have been Juliet's balcony.) As the wedding banquet was being prepared, I would mount a ladder at the back and rush forward along a narrowing path, shouting my directions to the cooks, while from the other end came a Flying Scotsman, Lady Capulet, shouting hers. Since she wore a robe with flowing sleeves, as I did, and my footing grew smaller as I went, and since she was played by Germaine Greer, I expected every night to be knocked ten feet down on to the stage. I knew nothing about Germaine's feminism at that time, when she was still a research student at Newnham. It never occurred to me, even when she restrained me violently in my attempt at duelling with Romeo's father, that any general resentment could be working in her. Only when, at the first performance, she sat me down with great force on a step, so that I just caught the edge of my coccyx, did I begin to wonder. And yet I may have been mistaken. She had taken a lot of trouble in getting me to have tea at the Lion Hotel with her and a woman who was reputed to be a princess from a

central European state, and who later at a rehearsal threw her arms round me as I was sitting in the dark in the auditorium. Realising later how Germaine was said to feel about women sleeping with men, I saw that I might by rejecting the princess have aroused Germaine's anger not on general but on personal grounds. Not she but her protégé had been rejected.

I had no more parts after 1965, but by this time there had been some changes in the Marlowe Society, which must have remained almost unchanged for some fifty years before that, since its foundation by Justin Brooke - an Emmanuel man not related to the poet Rupert, who is often wrongly credited with founding it. For more than forty years the moving spirit had been 'Dadie' (or George) Rylands, who had played Diomedes in the Society's production of *Troilus* in 1922. The world was now moving, however, into the era of the adult as 'paper tiger' and seniors could not expect the young to treat them as they used to do. There were some brilliant professional actors-to-be in the 1965 *Troilus*: Michael Pennington, John Shrapnel, John Ellis - all made names for themselves later. There was also perhaps the first undergraduate impresario, Tony Palmer, a man of very unusual energy and ambition, who looked like the tycoon of fiction at the age of 25. By general rumour he owned a travel agency in Salzburg while still an undergraduate. He certainly made a splash with his production of *Oedipus Rex* at the Guildhall, which gained the reputation of being the 'Cambridge Greek play', although this is in Greek, performed only once every four years, and has long been held under the auspices of the Arts Theatre of which Dadie is chairman. Tony was so successful, with parties coming from as far away as Liverpool, that he was able to sell seats for the dress rehearsal, and to have records of the performance sold at Miller's Music Shop. Undergraduate shows seldom drew audiences as well as that. But publicity was Tony's forte. He won it notoriously by slander or libel, which went unchallenged probably because people were loath to take legal action against undergraduates, regarded as irresponsible by a kind of fool's licence. One of the worst moments came when it was reported in print that according to Tony there were various options open to freshmen, one of them being 'drinks, drugs and dames' with Gabor. The alliteration in itself was a sign of the jokiness intended. Gabor Cossa, a Hungarian exile who owned an antique shop opposite the Fitzwilliam Museum, an excitable man in the first place, and a great comic actor, flew in the air. He was a businessman, he could not afford to let an accusation like that go without a murmur, yet he could not, being in the Cambridge amateur theatre world himself, take proper action. I sat over a pint in The Mitre for an hour or more with Tony, trying to get him to see that. He was like an autistic child. Only when he later described the Bell School of Languages in Hills Road as a place where you could pick up girls, and was instantly visited

by Frank Bell's lawyer, did he climb down. But within the Marlowe Society he was in a different position.

Tony flouted Dadie's authority as though he had no knowledge of his standing in the theatre, his friendship with John Gielgud and Peggy Ashcroft, his achievement as the first man to record on gramophone a complete recording of all Shakespeare's plays. Dadie was cut to the quick, wanted no more to do with the Marlowe except for the recordings, which had in any case been increasingly made by professionals, not all ex-Marlovians. Yet he adored the theatre and was intensely proud of the Society's long history. He would come to the dressing-rooms at the Arts breathing admiration - 'So real, Ron' - and was still prepared to take on a whole production. I had arrived at a convenient moment. Would I like to be Senior Treasurer in his place, he asked. There was little responsibility so far as money went, as the Arts Theatre looked after all that. I agreed.

By this time senior members generally had not much authority. The committee was always very friendly, nobody objected to meeting in my room at Emmanuel, far as it was from the centre of town. But the tours in Germany, so successful for three or four years, came to a stop when someone proposed we went to Japan instead. Germany had no glamour. We had played to 1500 people at a performance each time we went to Hamburg, theatre staff couldn't do too much for us, the papers had rave reviews, finance and guarantees from city councils were generous. The British Council looked after us. There were no funds for taking twenty or thirty people with props and costumes halfway round the world, and the various organisations we approached offered nothing. By the time my objections had been proved right it was too late, and there were no more Marlowe tours abroad in my time.

A Senior Treasurer was a sugar daddy, needed but not wanted. Dadie rang me up one day, most unusually; he had practically lost all contact. A leaflet advertising the next production had said 'we are not interested in the words as Shakespeare happened to write them' - a surely deliberate slap in the face, when Dadie had maintained for years that the virtue of the Marlowe was the speaking of the verse. Nobody had mentioned the leaflet to me, and there was little understanding when I called a meeting to say we had to climb down over that. At least the words were deleted from the notes intended for the programme. But the performance, without altering the text more than the R.S.C. did at that time, turned the whole of *The Tempest* upside down. Prospero carried a forked staff which could be held so as to give the appearance of horns growing from the back of his head. Miranda was a tetchy, spoilt girl, Caliban a handsome young chap, white-bodied and almost naked, Ariel sang

'where the bee sucks' so dismally that I asked why: it was because he was miserable serving Prospero. This could Brecht and Beckett do.

I auditioned for Antony, not hopefully - where would my middle-aged Cleopatra have been found? - but at the last moment *Henry IV Part 2* was decided upon, and the casting list published before I knew it. Falstaff was a part I would have loved to play, and could have, without looking too old for the rest of the cast. So sour grapes may have played a part in my astonishment at the way the chosen Falstaff coughed and wheezed from the first scene onwards. It was meant to symbolize the state of England, rent by civil war. A great crow hung over every scene, menacing. I nursed my wounds and wrote a piece called 'Shakespeare Upstaged', damning Shakespearean productions everywhere, very nearly.

The really popular older people with undergraduates were Judy Birdwood, daughter of the Field-Marshal, and Helen Fulcher, who had a room reached by a fire-escape behind the Festival Theatre in Newmarket Road, where they ran the costume-hire department of the Arts Theatre and made costumes for some local productions. Both made everyone very welcome, though Judy's motherly size and character made her the more noticeable. She flourished in a world where nearly everybody was 'darling', and the walls of her office were covered with photographs of scenes from Marlow performances dating back several decades. It was she and Helen who kept the Marlowe together, rather as the caretaker at the ADC, Albert Bishop, lugubriously kept the ADC Theatre going. They all had the advantage of not seeming to be or want to be on any different level from the actors, and of having been around for more years than young men and women could easily imagine. They made me welcome too, but the hours spent in Marlowe committees to little purpose made me feel like the figurehead at the wrong end of the ship. Richard Bainbridge, Senior Tutor of Corpus and a great comic actor, wanted at least to join in, and I gradually slipped out of all contact.

Richard's room in Corpus was round the corner from the Arts Theatre, he was as devoted to the acting world as Donald Beves had been, and he had given up his practical academic work, whereas I wanted still to write. But he had a machine in the Zoology department which he would show to anyone interested. It was a transparent circular tube perhaps twenty feet in diameter, filled with water, which could be revolved. In order to study the movement of fish, he would introduce one through a hole near a movie camera placed above, and set the table in motion. The fish, however, would not stay beneath the camera unless it could be prevented from darting forward, and the water would not move within the tube unless a solid gate was introduced. Such a gate would obstruct the fish, so another one was needed to allow the fish to pass. On top of all that, the wheel needed to accelerate quickly enough so that the fish was not swept backwards by the flow, but always remained



directly under the camera. A powerful electric motor provided for this, and I marvelled at Richard's ingenuity as the huge wheel jerked into top speed, the gate opening in front of the fish to let it through, the other gate remaining closed to keep up the pressure on the water until it also came round and opened for the fish. It all had some relevance to the design of ships, so Richard said. It looked to me rather symbolical, perhaps of undergraduates facing exams.

## THE OLD ABBEY HOUSE



From 1952 till 1964 we lived in a house that Nikolaus Pevsner describes as 'exceedingly picturesque', and perhaps it did just exceed a bit. It reminded me of Gracie Fields' song, 'Ours is a nice house ours is', because of the line 'The front's at the back and the back's at the front', which was exactly right. The red brick Dutch gable on one face had the date 167(4?) still visible, the two gables on the other were earlier, and parts were late sixteenth century, with a few slabs from a twelfth century Augustinian priory built in. Nothing else of the priory was left apart from a few stones put together to make a couple of arches in the garden, and the so-called Cellarer's Chequer across the road, containing a brougham, a manually-operated fire-engine that had belonged to Trinity College, and some Anglo-Saxon coffins. The bakehouse had an old plough blocking the passage beside it, an early nineteenth century printing press, and some fine earthenware jugs. Alongside it was an L-shaped four-seater lavatory, no longer in use. The back garden, which I neglected disgracefully, had alongside it the remains of a medieval wall with many bare patches of worn clunch in which stonecrop and ragwort planted themselves. We persuaded ourselves it looked like the house called *Howards End* in E.M. Forster's novel - also of red brick - so that I went on several cycling expeditions in a fruitless search of the one he had in mind. But it

was more unkempt than Forster's - no wych elm or dog-roses or tulips, and the front lawn was worn away by children playing football. We needed eggs off the ration, and the hen-run at the far end of the back garden became a mud-patch. But we had walnut-trees, and even a vine, just like Howards End, and some rooms were panelled with bolection mouldings in deal. John and Sue were delighted when we moved into the empty rooms, rushing from wall to wall in welcome to the broad spaces.

In medieval times the great priory church had had farmland attached, as far out as Fen Ditton. After the Reformation it disappeared stone by stone, though the foundations were still visible in the early nineteenth century. The Old Abbey House, as it was now called, had been the manor-house of Barnwell village, today well within the city boundaries - hence the bakehouse, which could have baked bread for all the villagers and probably accommodated their Sunday roasts. Legends had grown, especially the one about the eighteenth century occupant and owner, Squire Jacob Butler, whose portrait still hangs in Christ's College. In his day Stourbridge common was the scene of a fair held annually in late summer, of which he was the landlord. It was a huge affair, superior, according to Defoe, to the fairs at Leipzig and Nijni Novgorod, and dating back to the twelfth century. Hops from Kent, coal from Newcastle, furs from Germany, wines from France all changed hands here, but to Squire Butler nothing mattered in comparison with the crops he wanted to sow in the autumn. If the stalls were not cleared in time he drove his coach and horses through and over them. He showed favour, on the other hand, by inviting all the giants and dwarves in the sideshows to take dinner with him. His taste for the grotesque was gratified also by his building a tall square coffin, which stood in his living-room and in which he invited his friends to sit for what he called a house-warming. The record of his life still stands in the churchyard of the Abbey Church in Newmarket Road, close to what was our garden in the form of six large stones originally placed by him inside the church, and known as his hexateuch. Beginning in the third person it drifts into the first person as he vents his indignation on the aldermen and others who offended him, claiming for himself the title of 'the Old (True?) Briton'. It is illegible now, but the full contents are printed in Cooper's *Annals*.

There have been stories of Squire Butler and his dog haunting the house, but there are few witnesses to this in comparison with the large number who claim to have seen a nun and a small furry animal (see Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research). How should there not be a nun, with the nunnery of St Radegund, later Jesus College, not a mile away? Mrs Previtt, our daily help who looked after the children so carefully, reported that her husband could remember many years before seeing the monks walking in procession round the garden, singing and clanking their chains. Stories of the nun seem to have begun just

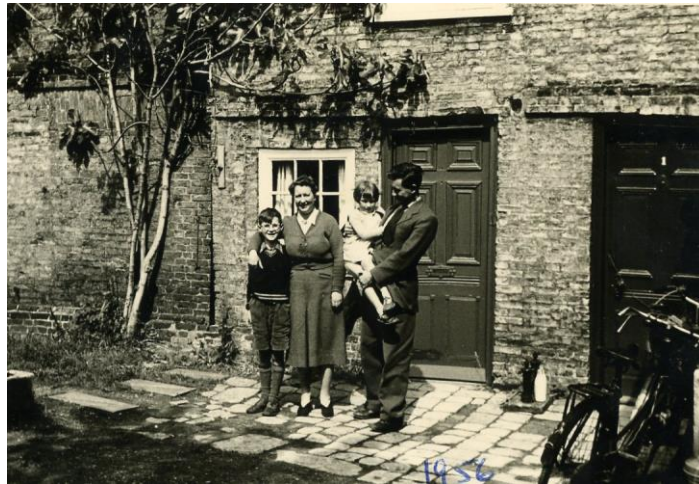
after 1900, when a Fellow of Pembroke occupied the whole house of which we had only the middle section. According to his wife, on their first night the cook came downstairs in a fright, after hearing loud thumps on her bedroom door. These could not have been made by the Newfoundland, or was it a Labrador dog, the family pet, because it had had its claws cut. From then on the stories multiplied. The most convincing, to me, was told by the Fellow's wife herself, who wrote that she was passing her children's bedroom door when she heard her daughter say she was glad not to be sleeping in her parent's bedroom any more, because she didn't like that person who kept walking through. 'Oh you're a great goose to be frightened by a thing like that', said her elder brother. 'I used to feel frightened too, of course, but then I realised it was only God, and he had forgotten to make himself invisible.'

The children had surely seen something? Or had their parents told them in the first place, and their imaginations had built on that? My own story is even less definitive. I had carefully not said anything about ghosts to Sue or John, though the Forsters - Leonard and Jeanne, who had been tenants before us - were sure the nun was benevolent, and useful as a babysitter. So I was surprised when Sue, about three years old, asked one evening who it was who had sat by her bed when she was wearing her dressing-gown. Fending off, I said 'Don't know. Who was it, Sue?', and she answered 'Nun'. At that I stopped - perhaps I secretly believed in the lady myself, or wanted to - and Sue said no more either. Afterwards I thought to myself that she had never seen a nun, had no idea what a nun might look like, and that she had probably meant to say 'None', which she did say sometimes, meaning 'nobody'. But why did she ask the question in the first place? Ronald Norrish, the Nobel prize winner who was a Fellow of Emmanuel when I was telling this story, was excited by it. 'There's proof, he said, 'A child's evidence is worth all the rest'. But I still kept my doubts. Sue also asked me about that time who was playing the recorder when she was in bed, as if there was something mysterious about it. But I often played the recorder myself, as she knew, and I wonder now whether she had heard of some story involving a nun after all, and was inclined to suspect the recorder-music might be connected with it. I prefer on the whole to let the whole thing end, like the ghost reported in Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, with a melodious twang.

John never saw a thing, as you might put it. The garden became his air-gun shooting-range, and he explored the house with enthusiasm, clambering over the rafters and on one occasion putting his foot through the ceiling of the bedroom of Peggy Young, the district health visitor who lived with two other ladies in the next section. Peggy, however, whose common-sense couldn't be doubted, told a story of having the bedclothes snatched

from her bed repeatedly while she was in it, and of switching on the light to find no-one in the room.

Another health visitor, less trustworthy, spoke of having a tray pressed down on her face by someone standing on a higher level than the floor. She recognised the tray later as a brass one from Benares that stood on a sideboard, and concluded that the floor must have been higher in the days when the priory existed - although the house was not known to stand on any part of the priory grounds occupied by a building.



*2 Old Abbey House 1956*

My own story comes to nothing. I would sit in the living-room around midnight and ask Radegund, as I called her, to visit me, but she must have declined. People say I shall never see a ghost, behaving like that. But I am credulous really, and feel shivers up my spine if the floor creaks, even in some lonely part of the modern house I live in now. At the time of my Kafka upheaval I did wonder to myself about supernatural influences, though I rather agreed with Humphry's friend Peter Eden that some people get their experience too much from books.

Pat saw no ghost either. She did see a light descend from the top of the small 'Ascot' gas-boiler in the kitchen, and float down to the floor. When she told me this, I objected that she was repeating something that Jeanne Forster had told us about her own experience with the same boiler. I should not have objected, for it might have been confirmation rather than emulation. But some years later when I reminded Pat about it she denied having any memory of the incident.

We had a wonderful twelve years in the Old Abbey House, bad as it was for my asthma, being damp and having no proper foundations. My green-panelled study, a little

lower than the level of the back garden, was snug. The stone-flagged kitchen was fit for a farm-house. Once I stopped banging my head on the low doors I had nothing to complain of. But we were there as tenants of the Folk Museum, to whom the house had been given by Lord Fairhaven in 1945, 'as a thank-offering for our deliverance', as the plaque in the front hall said. He had meant it to become the home of the museum, but failed to endow it, and though we had a gentleman's agreement that there would be no need for us to leave so long as there was no money for the original purpose, a wealthier tenant offered himself, and that was the end for us. Sue was more distressed than anyone, but there was no help for it. In autumn 1964 we moved to a white cube topped by a pyramid in Milton Road.

## TEACHING

I started 'supervising' on German literature in 1947, after a year as a research student, still not having taken any Part II examination. It was, and still is, part of the system at Cambridge to employ research students to supervise, which meant, in German, setting a piece of work, either a translation or a critical essay, once a week or once a fortnight, and discussing it with a group of two or three, or with one man on his own. (It was a long time before I had any women to supervise.) Immediately after the war there were more people in need of supervision than before, with so many returning from the forces. One or two of my pupils had been colonels or brigadiers, some were older than I was, and if my coal fire hadn't got going properly they would be holding a sheet of yesterday's *Times* over the fireplace to encourage a draught, while I got going on my first remarks. I kept one jump ahead, having read scarcely more than they had, and sometimes, I suppose, less knowledge of the language.

After we had come back from Switzerland, Emmanuel offered me a room to supervise in, though I was not elected a Fellow till 1958. For a while I tried to pack in four hours supervision on a Saturday morning, an exhausting job, with no intervals. It did lead, however, to my witnessing an early atomic experiment. Rag Day - never Rag Week in those days - was always held on a Saturday, which I always forgot, so that some of the money-raising stunts took place under my window, distractingly. The best of these was a Heath Robinson construction made of bicycle wheels, bits of string, a step-ladder, and oddments reaching some twenty feet high. For sixpence given to the charity, always the Earl Haig Fund for wounded soldiers in those days, you were entitled to pull a lever which turned a wheel which tipped a bucket which dropped a ball, and so on, till the process ended in a chopper slicing a potato in half, and you were congratulated on splitting the atom. There were many other stunts: tip the lady out of her sofa with a well-aimed ball; watch a man having a bath in cold November, well hidden in foam; add a penny to a line of pennies on the pavement, meant to reach a mile in length; give something to a poor man angling for fish down a drain. There were floats progressing in file through the town, as at seaside resorts. Most popular of all, and now recently revived, was the stunt of Hieronymus and his Son, who would put on a Ku Klux Klan white hood and smock before a large audience on and near Magdalene Bridge. Two volunteers from Magdalene were always found. Petrol would be poured over them, they would stand on the parapet till a lighted match was applied, when they would jump in a whoosh of flame into the river. All these stunts came to a halt in the late 1960s, when some students objected to the Earl Haig Fund and tried to persuade the public to contribute to Communist North Vietnam's charities instead. It was a long time before the Rag

picked itself up again. So long as it continued, Saturday mornings were a bad choice, and I spread my dozen or fourteen hours more widely over the week.

My room was sparsely furnished, though it had handsome glass-fronted book cupboards and a classical mantelpiece. One armchair had corduroy cushions and a sloping back, supported by a rod which could be placed in one of three positions. When the rod was not properly fitted in the slots it would slip out, and the back would collapse behind the sitter: I called it my Sweeney Todd chair. The outside room in the set had a table covered with bones, meant for anatomy students, and a half-skeleton I called Yorick; later the room was used for table tennis, a noisy game when I was trying to teach. I was definitely not a Fellow.

As I became more competent at supervision I began to supervise research students too, the first in 1955. I supervised perhaps fifteen in all, not many in twenty-seven years, but I suspect I gained a bad reputation. Not that I neglected my students; perhaps I gave too much scrutiny to their work. By the time I began, I had been changing my own views about studying literature, mainly as a result of reading I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis, and going to a few, very few, of Leavis' s lecturers. Richard's Practical Criticism was a revelation to me. His presentation of a dozen poems without naming their authors, except at the end of the book, made me see that my appreciation was no better than that of many of the undergraduates and others whose opinions he quoted. I was perhaps - I can't remember exactly now - as capable of praising the Reverend Studdert Kennedy, 'Woodbine Willie' of the First World War, and denigrating John Donne, as they were. Leavis too encouraged me to take a critical view, though reading him again in recent years has made me doubtful whether I accepted his famous 'This is so, is it not?' with too ready agreement, like the pupils of Socrates. On the one occasion when I had a long conversation with him - about Lawrence and German literature - he was mild and reasonable, as he often was, to judge by other people's experience. When I wrote to him on his eightieth birthday to congratulate him and to tell him he was still remembered in his old college, by me and John Harvey, with gratitude, he replied with one of his also famous tirades about how badly the college had treated him in the distant past. At all events, in the 1950s I began putting much more into practical criticism in Richards's sense than into scholarly research, and this was bad in one way for any research students who came my way. Research supervisors had some responsibility for my general dissatisfaction. One man began research about the influence of Schopenhauer on a nineteenth century dramatist, only to find that the dramatist had said, late in life, that he had just read Schopenhauer for the first time. This led to research into all the articles in periodicals mentioning Schopenhauer which the dramatist might have read and forgotten about. His supervisor did not warn him how fruitless this was likely to be, or point out that



Hegel's influence on the dramatist was generally acknowledged, and that by the time Hegel had been filtered into the ideas of a play, his ideas on the will and on polarity might be impossible to distinguish from Schopenhauer's. Again, a man at one of the new, post-war universities wrote on Nietzsche's use of the aphorism, which he argued was stylistically the appropriate form for Nietzsche's philosophy. As the outside examiner I was troubled by the fact that many of the so-called aphorisms were several pages long, and even more troubled when the candidate at the oral examination treated my objections as though he did not think them serious. I told him I would probably decide to ask him to rewrite, and was rung up the same night by his supervisor who complained vigorously for an hour that I was imposing Cambridge standards on a young university. He would not have said that if he had had my experience at Oxford, where I examined a thesis dealing with the use of classical myth in German drama of the twentieth century. This was a compilation covering not only figures of classical drama such as Oedipus, but Narcissus and others who had perhaps never been treated dramatically before. To make it more than a compilation the student had argued that the myths were potentially dramatic, and that his aim was to discover which dramatist had turned them to best use. He chose for this purpose a work of Hauptmann's old age, his wooden version of the Orestes story, *Die Atriden*, but gave almost no grounds for doing so, which was not surprising. I held that the drama of the twentieth century had been sifted so as to group together those dealing with classical myth, but that this was of no greater interest than a grouping of almost any other kind. The thesis said nothing of value either about myth or drama, and I failed it. I was never invited to examine at Oxford again.

With my own research students I always began by hoping some critical response could be worked into the research, but was disappointed. I couldn't blame them: they saw what was going to be acceptable, and that their careers depended on being awarded Ph.D.'s. Compilations were usually the result, and were successful. Some of the best students went off to do social work, or, having met the degree requirements, gave up academic work altogether. It became more and more clear to me that Ph.D. theses led only to university jobs. No-one ever built on to the work done by someone else, as some scientific researchers do. My own Ph.D. on Goethe's science was ignored by other writers on the same, specialised subject and is now apparently forgotten. I saw value in research into textual editing, and in bringing to light some almost unknown author, but in research into eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century German literature neither of these kinds of work was easily found. So students whose interests had been narrowing ever since they entered the sixth form and started on their three subjects for 'A' levels now concentrated for three, four or five years on a tiny patch. After passing their B.A., they needed to read widely. They spent most of their time reading secondary articles and books around the few literary works

on which they were concentrating. Some researched only on secondary articles, other people's research.

I was served my turn when one of my candidates who had tried to establish the influence of one author on another was asked to re-submit. I had hoped he would use what he learned in order to increase appreciation of the author influenced, but he too saw the red light. His thesis was sent back not because he had failed to do the scholarly thing, but because he had not been able, after painstaking inquiries, to pinpoint any definite influence, as though a negative conclusion was in the examiners' eyes a useless one.

My books on Goethe, Kafka, Brecht, and what I called the German tradition in literature were often greeted with the same scholarly rejection. D.J. Enright saw what I was after, and was reasonably favourable, so were Stuart Hampshire and other men with a broad critical interest. I noticed more often - perhaps too dejectedly - the kind of review that ignored completely what I was saying, and concentrated on my errors. A review that distressed me more than any other was one by Eudo Mason in *Oxford German Studies*. Mason had been an inspiration to me as an undergraduate, and I had liked his critical appraisals in Rilke's *Apotheosis*. He was my predecessor as lecturer in Basle, and I had always, while there, been asked to measure up to his performance. When my book on Goethe was published Mason took forty pages to oppose me by a variety of dodges and sleights of hand, quoting me with omissions that allowed him to make me seem to say the opposite of what I had said, allowing nothing for the positive appreciations I had made, presenting me as a malcontent. It was difficult to do anything about this mammoth since Eudo had killed himself after the tragic death of his wife, and the Oxford editors at first refused me a reply just on that account. But they yielded to persuasion, and I heard a friend of Eudo's say some years later that I had 'come out of it well'. Yet it is worth bringing the story to life again as illustrating how much British Germanists like their German counterparts, looked on criticism as *lèse-majesté*. 'Kritik' is for journalists, daily newspapers; scholarship is neutral. Under this cloak scholars assert by implication what they never openly maintain. An author's reputation is established by the weight of his publications, the fact that his *Collected Works* have appeared. Research then swells the reputation by sheer volume. As René Wellek says in his *Theory of Literature*, expressing a common view, the mere fact that you choose to write about an author is an evaluation of him. It is often only an evaluation of the chances of doing research.

Supervision for the Tripos was always enjoyable, though I learned with time not to expect many undergraduates to 'think for themselves'. I would start out trying to keep to their essay, asking awkward questions, praising, correcting mistakes, but I was already fifteen to twenty years older than they were, and as I passed forty I ceased even to tell myself I was

one of them, on their side against the evil examiners. Few were willing to probe what I said, as American students usually have done. As my view of German literature was largely negative, and they would not answer back, I developed a feeling of guilt, which perhaps drove me to asserting too one-sidedly what criticisms I had. But before I could take this to heart I became involved in many other things, in comparison with which supervision was a relief. In 1958 I was elected a Fellow.

Till that time I had had the use of a room in College for supervising, and had four invitations a term to dine without charge at High Table, which I almost never accepted. I felt out of it, knew next to nobody, had no part in college life apart from teaching. Once I was elected, everything changed. I was offered a bigger room, properly furnished. Porters treated me with deference, brought my mail, were distantly friendly. I began to eat meals I had never dreamt of, it was not long since rationing. I also had to pay for them - well, not had to, but I felt an obligation. This is how a college works. First they ask you most politely if you would like to be, say, Treasurer. A grand title, it deceived *The Times* who rang me in mistake for the Bursar. In reality it meant chasing men who had gone down, i.e. finished study, without paying their bills: there were a lot of them, and most never replied. We were too much of a family, in the Master's view, ever to sue them, and every so often we would write off bad debts. Then there was the vacancy for a secretary to the Governing Body, and to the Council, a smaller body which alternated with the larger one and usually decided it could not act independently because of the interests of the Fellows as a whole might be affected. I took both jobs.

## DOMESTIC BURSAR

That eased me in. By 1964 I was fairly inured to college work - I was Senior Treasurer of the dramatic society too - and Sir Galahad came uppermost in me once again. Edward Welbourne retired as Master, so did the Senior Tutor and the Domestic Bursar; we were left with only one college officer to give continuity, and Fellows were asked to volunteer for the domestic post. I don't know why I took on this 'dogsbody' job, as John, then 16 years old, called it. It wasn't to earn money for his university expenses; I only thought of that later. It was an impulse of self-sacrifice, that's all I can say, and it nearly ruined me. I was quite unsuitable for all the management and accounting side of the work, and the evening after the Governing Body had confirmed my appointment I had swarms of butterflies swirling up to my neck. Tony Sills, my doctor, gave me some tranquillisers, and I kept on for five years, not a bad stint. But I had never kept accounts in my life, and had no idea of what catering, furnishing, maintaining gardens, dealing with staff wage schemes, presenting six-monthly estimates involved. The myth still held sway, that you could do this kind of work while still lecturing, supervising, researching and writing, and I actually did all those things, since the chief accountant Sydney Gibbons knew the job inside out, and Gus Ward, the Bursar, was rather more than a long-stop, I fancy. The time was near when a full-time man would be appointed, but we still went on in a gentlemanly way, like very small-scale cabinet ministers with a civil service backing them. A great advantage of the old scheme was that a Domestic Bursar who was a Fellow was treated as an equal. People would come with endless complaints about parking cars, litter in the courts, mistakes in French on the menu-cards, charges for use of the college van, requests for expensive armchairs, but nearly always in a friendly way. It was good of you to be doing the job at all, though you couldn't trade too much on that. Once the post became full time, the atmosphere changed. Though elected as a Fellow, the Domestic Bursar was an employee, and treated as one.

Even so, I had some small troubles. 'Oh, so you're Dr Gray are you?', said one of the bedmakers, with venom, at a protest meeting of all the bedders. I was proposing to redistribute their allotments to rooms, to deploy them in the new building just opened as well as in the old ones, which they thought meant the sack. It was quite a lively mudslinging meeting, though most bedmakers were always lambs. In fact there were no sackings, for them, but a much more painful one for the kitchen manager. People look back with longing for the days of Mr C., who had for years past provided lavishly for every occasion. If you were invited to an undergraduate society dinner there would be Egyptian splendour in the courses, mounds of pineapple, grapes, kumquats, lichees in the dessert, and the charges would be very reasonable. High Table dinners, free for all Fellows, are looked back on with

equal relish. The trouble was knowing how it was all paid for. Judging by the bills, half a pound of steak per junior member was served at every meal. Matches by the tens of thousands of boxes were being ordered. Hundreds of turkeys would be bought at Christmas, while prices were low, C. explained, for use at the May Ball. I knew nothing had been done to curb him for a long time, but did not realise, having lost my sense of smell completely, that there was whisky on his breath all day. And he was such a friendly, obliging man. When I called a meeting of the Service Committee and asked him to explain I felt almost as much guilt as he did, for he didn't appear to feel a great deal of it. But coming out of my ivory tower for a moment I fired him.

The consequences were horrible. C. was devoted to the College, it was his pride to serve us all, and the rejection nearly killed him. He collapsed in the street with a stroke a few days later, and for a long time got about on one leg, the other being paralysed. He recovered, after many years, though his wife died not long after he lost his job. With great tenacity he cured his addiction to alcohol, and when I last heard of him he was back in catering, in a more modest position. He was a fine cook, an advantage when he was in charge of cooks, and when he was on his own too. I felt bad about having undone him - should I have let him go on as my predecessors had? The answer to that was 'no', and after all, savings are ordinary enough in business firms. The point was, C. was part of the family, and I paid not enough attention to that.

In compensation, I did get on very well with the cooks, especially the Cornishman Mr Lovering, the gardeners, especially George Sealy, and the porters, several of whom came and went, for the time of 'pupil power' was drawing near, and the porters were the P.B.I. (Poor Bloody Infantry). Undergraduates were playing up as never before - not tomfoolery or plain silliness or amazing, deliberately misplaced ingenuity, like putting a Baby Austin on top of the Senate House, but politically motivated harassment. Graffiti would appear overnight, sprayed with aerosol; one Sunday morning the four columns and pilasters of the chapel had part of a four letter word sprayed across each of them. It was obvious who had done it, but impossible to get a confession, and the Head Porter had to patrol for half the night, trying to catch them redhanded. Jimmy Mansfield, a muscled ex-barman, would break down in tears, telling me about it, there was so much malice involved. Jimmy resigned in the end, and it was partly our fault for not backing him strongly. His successor had to leave after a police agent provocateur caught him in a public lavatory, and his predecessor had run off with one of the bedmakers, leaving a weeping wife for me to console. So Head Porters generally were not on the best form at that time. But George Sealy would sniff at undergraduate behaviour, take the Belisha beacon off the swamp cypress or haul the builders' caravan out of the pond

with only contempt for stupidity. It's true he did not have to keep order himself. But his marvellous gardens began to tell on me more and more. What I am really glad about, from my time as Domestic Bursar, is getting to know the staff so well, and learning to really love gardens.



*Ron as Praelector (centre) with Alan Baker, (Senior Tutor, left) and Eric Marshall (Head Porter, right) 1983*

## THE OPPOSITES

In 1967 I was rash enough to publish a book entitled *The German Tradition in Literature, 1871-1945*. It was an attempt at ordering my dissatisfaction with many German works in a survey of what I had read over the past twenty odd years, vaguely alluding in the title to Leavis's '*Great Tradition*' of English writers who, as he says in his first chapter, 'are significant in terms of that human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life'. That is vague enough, and Leavis relies more on incidental illustration than on definition of his tradition, which of course is represented by Jane Austen, George Eliot, Conrad, Henry James, and D.H. Lawrence, Dickens being added later. I could not with any reason look for exact equivalents in German, where the novel is less important than the drama anyway, for a list of writers so various. I did hope to find in a broad sense some similar features that would correspond in a general way to the hints and allusions provided by Leavis. As it turned out, only D.H. Lawrence had any remarkable similarity with German writers, and it was precisely in this similarity that I found least of the tradition I was looking for.

The detail is what matters, and the detail is set out in the book. In what I am concerned with now it is not the quality of the writing that counts, but rather a trend of thought, which I first came across at the time when, as an undergraduate, I vaguely thought I would like to know more about Jakob Boehme. My supervisor, Henry Garland, warned me off from the start. I had read a book by Eudo Mason about Rilke which used the terms 'Eindeutigkeit' and 'Zweideutigkeit', referring to single-meaning and double-meaning, and scattered the words all through my essay. Garland was not impressed: 'Don't let those ideas become a shibboleth', he said, and having looked up the word I decided I wouldn't. It is the only thing he said of any importance that I remember. But in one form or another these words come back at me, or rather the idea of polarity and synthesis, found in alchemy, found in German idealist philosophy, found in Rilke too, constantly reappeared in almost everything German I read. They are not peculiar to Germany, the Yin and the Yang of Taoism, the 'opposites' of Heraclitus and the pre-Socratics are very similar in a broad sense. It was only because I was paid to read and lecture about German thought and German literature that they figured so large for me. I never felt in sympathy with them, but I could not get away from them, and my whole way of thinking was a reaction against them.

The opposites, in Boehme and in alchemy called Sulphur and Mercury, or, equally well, the wrath and love of God, are supposed in these philosophies to permeate everything. For Goethe there is attraction and repulsion, male and female, systole and diastole, all brought under the one heading or the other. I could not see how 'male' went particularly with either 'attraction' or 'repulsion'. Women might find in men either, neither, or both. Nor could I

see how 'opposite' applied. A man is not the opposite of a woman. He may be a contrary, but there are Rambo men and Amazon women, John Keatses and Brigitte Bardots, a whole spectrum from ultra-chauvinist to shrinking violet in which men and women can fill spaces at any point in the line. So it struck me as curious that Kant took so much pains with what he called the 'antinomies', providing extensive proofs, supposed to be strictly logical, showing contraries to be true. Kant proves, for instance, or says he proves, for he never convinced me, that the world must have had a beginning in space and time, and then in a parallel column alongside, that the world cannot have had a beginning in space and time. Both equally true, he says, not hearing my feeble cry of protest. And that is intolerable, he goes on, and I agreed.

Why was he forced to this conclusion? I suspected he was not forced. His arguments were all based on the form, 'For let us suppose that this is not so', with a later demonstration that such a supposition was impossible. As I saw it, you would not come across these uncomfortable contradictions by thinking along a line until you were brought to a halt. You would come across them rather if you started by trying to show that opposites or contraries were equally true, which Kant might well have done, out of sympathy with a generally - in a very broad sense - Neoplatonist way of thinking. As a rule, though, his arguments seemed to be accepted, and interest turned to what Kant made of them later. We are forced into this impasse, he concludes, because we are ourselves within space and time, conditioned by them, and unable to perceive the thing-in-itself, the truly objective reality that lies beyond all subjective assertion.

Kant was unhappy with his impasse. It was only through our intuitive sense of a moral law, as unshakeable as the course of the stars in the heavens, that we could derive any satisfaction from our earthly existence. 'Act in such a way', his well-known dictum went, 'that the maxim (principle?) of your action could become a cosmic law.' I misrepresent his complexity, his continual modifications in clause after clause of everything he began his sentences by saying. But there is something to be gained even as I inevitably misrepresent him. The main point is Kant's dissatisfaction with the intolerable situation he had, wilfully or not, brought upon himself. For Hegel, who followed only a few years later, there was no such dissatisfaction. Like Walt Whitman he could have said 'I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself.' The idea is neatly put in his thought about tragedy, as exemplified in the '*Antigone*' of Sophocles. The plot of this play centres on the disobedience of Antigone towards the ruler of Thebes, in burying her brother after he has fallen in battle while attacking the city. For her this is the naturally right thing to do. For Creon the ruler it is a disobedience of the law, deserving death, and since she is impenitent, he condemns her to



be walled up till she dies of starvation. For Hegel this exemplifies his general theme of the contradiction and ultimate fusion of opposites. The play shows a collision between the two highest moral powers, family love and the law of the State. Neither Creon nor Antigone is solely right: each is one-sided, and precisely because they are one-sided both end in injustice, 'though at the same time they obtain justice too'. Both are recognised, Hegel ends, as having a value of their own in the untroubled course of morality, it is only the one-sidedness in their claims that justice opposes.

Hegel had no knowledge, of course, of the Greek convention, which makes a compromise, if one takes his view, in allowing burial rites to enemies while war continues. For him the two extremes are necessary, to show that both are right and yet both wrong, and that only in a superhuman containment of both is justice found. Yet Sophocles' play does not show this, Hegel merely assumes it for his own purpose. In Sophocles Creon is denounced by the blind seer Tiresias for allowing the dead body to remain unburied. This has led to the pollution of all the altars of Greece, as birds have bathed in the spilt blood and carried it far afield. He is taught to understand his guilt by the suicide of his wife and of his son, betrothed to Antigone; he finally leaves, calling himself rash and foolish, while the Chorus sees his pride punished. Antigone, by contrast, though she mourns her life, never repents, and even hopes to find in the after-life that her loyalty to her brother is praised. Creon is a tragic figure, since he acted as he thought right, although some self-righteousness influenced his decision. But nothing in the play justifies Hegel in seeing both sides receiving both justice and injustice. He reads this into it.

Goethe has been called - by William James, I think - the poet of Hegel's philosophy, and there is some truth in that, at least as far as some poems and his play *Torquato Tasso* are concerned. In Tasso the two protagonists are contrasted as the inward-looking, reflective man, and the unreflecting man of action. There is something said about Nature having really intended them to be one, and the conclusion is reached when Tasso clasps his opponent, Antonio, as though in an attempt at really regaining their lost union. But there is no real possibility of that, and the play is rather a monument to Goethe's hope that it might be so. (E.M. Forster's *Howards End* has the same situation, but no synthesising conclusion.)

In Goethe's scientific works he is able to develop the idea with less restriction. The basis of his Colour-Theory for instance, opposing Newton's, is that there are two opposite colours, blue and yellow, each of which contains an element of red, and that if each is 'intensified', red takes over, until at length a pure red is reached, in which neither blue nor yellow is present. This cannot be confirmed scientifically. If you look down through a small quantity of yellow liquid there may be a touch of red, and similarly with blue, if the colours

are not quite free of admixture to start with. But no more red is seen by increasing the depth of the liquids, 'intensifying' them in that way, and no such progress towards red as Goethe imagined is visible either. Again the theory overrides the empirical reception of the evidence.

It is a long step from Goethe to Marx, but a shorter one from Hegel to Marx, who said that Hegel's pattern of thought was right, and that he was wrong only in relating it to spirit rather than matter. Dialectical materialism, as Marx's system is called, finds Hegel standing on his head and turns him right way up, as Marx himself said. What this means can be seen in Marx's view of history as he summarized it in *Das Kapital*. Originally, for him, men were not one-sided, as Antigone and Creon were for Hegel. They were many-sided, in the sense that each man took on all jobs needed for living: hunting, fishing, building, weapon-making, cooking and so on all had to be done not by specialists but by every individual. This early condition of Man realised all his potential. But with time specialization happened, and this involved separation. At length, the labourer found himself expropriated, giving up his land to someone who would employ him and cream off the profit he would otherwise make on his work. Capitalism had arrived. However, the forces of history were inexorably moving towards the time when the expropriators would be expropriated. The duality that had arisen when Man had separated the functions that had once been a single whole would be overcome at a higher level, and unity would return. For the original man had been whole without society being also a whole. In the course of time the working class, which had suffered from expropriation more than any other, would reassert itself, and in the communist society of the future - not reached until the workers had dictated their own will through revolution and further progress - there would be both communal ownership and individual ownership of the means of production. Each man and woman would be the owner of these means of production, but all men and women composing society would be owners at the same time. The interests of the individual and of society would harmonize, and the separation into opposite classes would cease.

The question, how much say any one individual can have in a complex social structure, was not answered or put by Marx. It is of no benefit to a worker to tell him he owns a factory if in fact it is run by a committee. However, the point for the moment is not to criticise Marx's thought, but to show how the same pattern of unity, separation into opposites, reunion, found in Hegel, can be turned to account in widely different fields, usually without much regard to the facts or the practicalities of a situation. Nietzsche, for instance, makes something entirely different of the dialectic of polarity-and-synthesis in his first work, on the origin of Greek tragedy. He makes little mention of any particular Greek tragedies, which vary a great deal one from another, some ending in reconciliation, others in stark

disaster, some being apparently ironical, others unflinching in facing injustice. It also makes the surprising statement, seeing that Nietzsche was a professor of classical literature at the time, that Dionysus was the Greek god of music. There is no disputing that Apollo was god of music, but Nietzsche is not interested in history, he wants rather to correct the view of the Greeks that saw them living in an Olympian calm of which Apollo was the symbol. Asserting the contrary view, Nietzsche makes much of the Dionysian element in Greek tragedy, the turbulent, ecstatic, dark, terrible force that Euripides portrays in *The Bacchae*. He needs to do this because his theme is not merely backward- but also forward-looking. He sees in Richard Wagner's music just such a Dionysiac power as, he maintained, the Greeks had known, and it is in order to champion Wagner, as the renewer of tragedy in its ancient sense, that he writes. Again, however, the pair of opposites is reunited in his final pages. Here he reflects how the Greeks had temples dedicated both to Dionysus and to Apollo, and he imagines an ancient Greek going to worship in the temples of both divinities. That is his resolving moment, satisfying if one accepts his division into two opposite powers, not satisfying it if one recalls that the Greeks worshipped many gods, introducing into their plays more themes than can be condensed into so convenient a formula. Once more the pattern is used in order to marshal history into manageable lumps, and a more objective outlook is deliberately (in Nietzsche's case) not attempted.

In the twentieth century Hermann Hesse has simplified more than most, though Thomas Mann's division between 'Bürger' or conventional citizen and 'artist' belongs with the same trend, as Brecht does too, as a Marxist. The title of Hesse's novel *Narcissus und Goldmund* matches exactly its schematic form, for the introspective Narcissus is intended as a complementary opposite to the outgoing Goldmund, corresponding to C.G. Jung's extroverts and introverts. Most of Hesse's novels suffer from his ordering of characters into twin rubrics. The same cannot be said of D.H. Lawrence, though the German influence on him makes the dialectic more noticeable in his work than it is in Blake and Coleridge. On the whole the dialectic has not played so great a part in English literature as it has in German, and in Lawrence it is seldom as schematic as it is in Mann, let alone Hesse. It shows itself in his description of Lincoln cathedral, in *The Rainbow*, where for some reason he sees the shafts as opposites, their meeting place at the crown of the vault as a fusion of both. By and large, Lawrence avoids this bending of realities to fit his system, of which there is often no sign at all, especially in the earlier novels and in many of the short stories. Because of his freer use of the dialectic, and its comparative absence in English literature, I called the trend I am describing the German tradition.

I might not have done so with as much conviction if I had interpreted Shakespeare's sonnets in the way I did after the mild heart attack I had in 1982. It was in the spring of that year, when I was recovering, still feeling rather groggy, that I re-read some of the sonnets in Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, and almost at once began writing a commentary on all of them. For some months interpreting them took nearly all my attention. It was not really like the interpreting of Kafka's *The Castle* that I wrote in 1954 at a period of great turmoil. I did not feel I was 'explaining everything', as Goethe did, I remembered, when he hit on his theory of plant metamorphosis, or that I needed to go to church to sort out my difficulties. Yet there was an urgency about it all, a sense of discovery, a belief that I was getting to the root of the sonnets in a way no-one had done before. This time, it's true, I wrote and rewrote everything for, in all, over twenty years, though I wrote the books on Cambridge and on Oxford gardens during that time too, as well as various short pieces, articles and reviews. The curious thing was that I was aware of some sort of relationship with alchemy and with Jakob Boehme, some of whose almost unintelligible writings I had read for my Ph.D. thesis, and whom I had wanted to study, for some reason, when as an undergraduate I first heard of him. There was no remote possibility of Shakespeare knowing anything of Boehme, whose first work appeared anyway only three years before Shakespeare died, and Shakespeare's plays were anything but dialectical in their general character. At most the plays show an occasional knowledge of alchemy, whose language Boehme used, or of Renaissance Neoplatonism, to which Boehme was heavily indebted. Boehme was simply the trigger, so far as my interpretation was concerned.

I was struck first by the sonnet, numbered 20, in which the young man to whom many sonnets are addressed, is spoken of in a way that makes him simultaneously a woman. It was not a question, as I saw it and still do, of his merely having a feminine beauty, though that was part of his attraction for the poet, the Rosalind in him. At this moment Shakespeare was speaking not so much of the young man, Mr W.H. or whoever else it may have been, whom he had just been urging for nineteen sonnets to beget a child so as to hand his beauty down to future generations, but to a human representation of an ideal, one in which both male and female were contrived in one. Such an ideal was familiar to the alchemists, and to Goethe as well, as I had shown thirty years before. It was also known all over the world: at least, primitive carvings often show the same fusion of sexes, and there are Greek and Roman examples too. So Shakespeare ranged himself with the people of whom I had been so critical. He was, like them, fascinated with an impossible combination. It seemed to me not only that this point had been missed by other people, but that the contradictions of almost everything said about the young man had been equally ignored. He is praised in sonnet after sonnet for his unfailing constancy in love, and many commentators took this at

face value, rejecting sometimes, as editors, emendations that would help to make him seem otherwise. But he is at least as often spoken of by the poet as unfaithful, and many sonnets are directly about his stealing of the poet's mistress, and his many affairs of love. Contradiction is mocked by characters in the plays, as when Bolingbroke denies that a man can be comforted by summer's heat in December snows; in the sonnets it is continually present, forming the substance not only of the young man's person and character, but also of the poet's appreciation of him.

The frequency of such contradictions placed the sonnets, for me, very much in the tradition of thought extending from Heraclitus to T.S. Eliot, which took a particular shape in Shakespeare's time through the translations by Ficino, a century before him, of all the works of Plato and of the *Corpus Hermeticum* of the early Christian era, which in turn influenced the Hermetists and alchemists. The significant difference from, say, Heraclitus, or from Hegel for that matter, lay in the use of sexual images, male and female rather than, for instance, individual and society, and this brought Shakespeare, so far as it sent, closer to Taoism with its Yin and Yang. These two principles are illustrated in a little carving in the Gulbenkian Museum at Durham by a laughing man enjoying himself on the body of a smiling woman - a vivid representation of one sense intended by 'the union of opposites'. When Shakespeare included sonnets addressed to a woman, in which he asks with little concealment and Rabelaisian humour to let him come to her, I saw him in the same mood as the Chinese Taoist, not distinguishing between everyday and cosmic lovemaking, wanting the world at large with the same passion as he felt for the mistress. It was an erotic and yet also a charitable passion, something like what Lawrence imagined in his story *The Man Who Died*, in which a man is taken down from a cross, still half alive, and restored by a priestess who initiates him into sexual mysteries.

This passion has tragic consequences, or is accompanied by tragic disappointment in one sonnet or another. Though Shakespeare adopted fully the idea of fusing opposites in one, he does not see in that fusion any release from the dichotomy of existence. As the poet who writes the sonnets, he is tormented by the thought that the mistress to whom he is devoted is mistress also to men of all kinds, that she is not his alone but common to everyone, not much different from a whore. He pushes the knowledge of this almost as far as he takes the tragic awareness in *King Lear*, and although he feels an equally strong adoration for the young man as for the mistress, without any sexual desire for him, there is no relief in that passion either. There is only a rock-bottom confidence in his loving praise of them both, which I thought to find expressed in Sonnet 29, as printed in the Quarto:

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising  
Haply I think on thee, and then my state  
(Like to the lark at break of day arising)  
From sullen earth sings hymns at heaven's gate.

I have modernised the spelling, but kept the brackets which editors usually remove, because I want to stress the ambiguity in 'my state ... from sullen earth sings hymns'. In one sense the sense is of being still on the dull ('sullen') earth, yet singing hymns from there, as in *De profundis clamavi*, but with joy like that of a lark ascending, as it ascends in the parenthesis.

That is not the whole of Shakespeare, though I find it not unlike the man I imagine writing the plays. But the plays are different, and his mind is great enough to create both them and the sonnets. He can afford to say so much and yet be uncommitted.



*Ron and Dorothy 1 Nov 2015, on his 96<sup>th</sup> birthday, two weeks before he died*