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Shooting History

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ONE

Home Thoughts

'THEY'RE COMING!' my elder brother Tom screamed. 'Run!' The wailing siren sounded close as he and my younger brother Nick fled out of the beechwood hollow. I was slow, wading through the leaves, my legs like lead weights. We had been playing on the edge of the school grounds in a towering section of the beechwoods called Fellows Gardens. Amongst the three of us, the identity of foe tended to settle on me. As they ran that day, my brothers were the friends. But there was a darker sense of an enemy beyond. Somehow the wailing siren seemed to signal the presence of a larger threat at hand. I burst into tears, stumbling to a halt, and found myself standing alone knee-deep in mud and leaves. Still the siren sounded. I suppose in retrospect it signalled only a fire, but then it sounded more eerie, more menacing.

I was born in 1947. My childhood was spent in the headmaster's house of Ardingly College, a minor public school set in the most green and rustic wastes of Sussex. Woven in and out of the sense of recent war and lurking threat were primroses, wood anemones, bluebells, and the sumptuous peace of countryside. From my bedroom window high up in the Victorian mass of red brick and scrubbed stone stairs I could see the lake, the woods, the rolling fields, and away in the distance, the long viaduct that bore the Brighton steam train to London and back. In the woods I, my brothers and the few other children that this isolated place could muster would play our own warfare.

My childhood swung between feelings of absolute safety and

daunting vulnerability. The episode in the wood, when I was perhaps five, took place in 1952, when the war still cast a long shadow over our lives. The syrupy yellowy substance that passed for orange juice, in small blue screwtop bottles, still came courtesy of ration coupons. When I stood in the X-ray machine in Russell & Bromley's shoeshop in nearby Haywards Heath, where toxic rays revealed my dark feet wriggling inside green irradiated shoes, the ensuing purchase still attracted talk of shortages.

In the early fifties, the Germans were still the oft-mentioned core of enemy. The adult talk was of military service, of doodlebugs, of blackouts and loss. Hence the rumble of planes, the crack of the sound barrier, and that siren spoke with such clarity of present danger, and of the newer Russian threat and atomic war.

My father had not fought in the Second World War. Had he done so he would never have met my mother. This absence of service signalled early that he was different from other fathers. Too young for the First World War, he was too old to be called up for the Second. Besides, the fact that he was a cleric somehow seemed to seal the idea that he would not have been allowed to fight. His age – he was fifty when I was five – and his lack of experience in warfare were among the rare issues that rendered him slightly inadequate in my childhood. While others boasted of fathers who had bombed Dresden, I could only plead that mine had led the auxiliary fire brigade at Charterhouse School, where he had been chaplain. Of this he would talk endlessly. The responsibility had brought with it precious petrol coupons, as his eccentric open-topped Hudson Essex Terraplane Eight became the fire tender. On so many family outings in the self-same car he would recount how ladders were lashed to a makeshift superstructure, and he would roar around the privileged boarding school in search of bombs. And then, one blessed day, he found one. A bomb had fallen on the school's hallowed lawns. Even now I'm not clear what fire he may then have had to fight. But it became my father's moment of 'action'.

Freud might argue that my own subsequent exposure to all-too vivid conflict was some kind of attempt to make up for George

Snow's absence of war. My father showed no inclination to fight, although his great height and booming voice gave him an intimidating, almost threatening presence. If only he had refused to join the armed services; but in our house in those days conscientious objectors were regarded as being as bad as the enemy themselves. His lack of a war record also represented a strange contrast to the military paraphernalia amongst which we grew up.

In our own childish warfare there was more than a whiff of class. The few children of the teaching staff who lived near enough qualified for our war games. Oliver was one of these, a dependable friend who generally took my side against my two brothers, squaring up the numbers. But the children of the 'domestic staff' did not qualify for such sport. Susan lived across the road from Oliver, but she was the child of the school's Sergeant Major. Although enticing and blonde, she was to be kept at a distance, and so almost became a kind of foe – unspoken to, mysterious. Her father had charge of the school guns, of which there were many. I have vivid memories of boys strutting around in military uniforms in large numbers, and of invasions staged in the school quadrangles. They were a further signal of that persistent sense of the overhang and threat of war.

A remote rural English boarding school is at best a strange and intense environment in which to grow up. My father, as headmaster, was God. He was an enormous man, six feet seven in his socks, and at least sixteen stone. He wore baggy flannel suits in term time, and leather-patched tweed jackets in the evenings. In the holidays he embarrassed us all with huge scouting shorts and long, tasselled socks knitted by my mother. His hands were large and handsome, the skin cracked and tanned. He was old for as long as I can remember. To me he was strict, dependable, and at times remote. I was a very inadequate son of God. In the ever-present school community, I felt exposed and commented upon.

Many of the domestic staff who lived on the school grounds seem to have been drawn from prisoner-of-war or internment camps. There were Poles, Italians, and others who appeared to have recently

been released from mental hospitals. We knew them all by their first names. Among them was Jim, a kind man who was often to be found standing outside the kitchens having a smoke. One day, on one of my regular tricycle circuits of the school, Jim stopped me and asked if I'd like to come up to his room for some sweets. I was five or six. I left my tricycle and followed him up the dark staircase. Inside he sat me down and started to talk. Very soon he was undoing my brown corduroy shorts. I was worried that I'd never be able to do up the braces again – I couldn't handle the buttons on my own. Suddenly I had no clothes on. Jim undid his trousers, and produced something which to me seemed absolutely enormous. At that very moment from beyond the door a voice shouted, 'Jim! Jim! Come out here.'

'Quick!' said Jim. 'Under the bed!' He hoisted his trousers and left the room. I could hear raised voices. I recognised the voice of the other man – it was the school bursar, an ex-Wing Commander who often came to lunch at home. Home, three hundred yards away, suddenly seemed a very long way away indeed.

Jim returned, and peered at me under the bed. It seemed he'd been spotted abducting me. 'You've got to go,' he said.

'What about the sweets?' I asked.

'Next time,' he said.

'Will you help me with my braces?' I asked anxiously. He did. I was never to see him again. My brother Tom told me some time later, when I cautiously asked, that Jim had been sacked. No one ever spoke to me about what happened. Yet I can't imagine that the bursar didn't tell my parents. The next time he came to lunch he didn't look me in the eye. I felt something bad had happened, but I didn't really know what.

Beyond the prison-camp feel of the domestic quarters there was one other place where there was evidence of war: Ardingly village, a long walk from the college. Most walks, most day care was in Nanny Rose's hands. She was a solid, dependable, working-class Kentish woman, with an irresistible laugh. We had two regular walks with her. The first would take us down past Collard's farm and the

ageing foot-and-mouth warning signs on the gates, to the Avins Bridge Hotel, which straddled the little railway line that ran from Ardingly to our nearest town, Haywards Heath. This walk was always a treat, because Nanny would time it to coincide with the arrival of a train. The steam engine would let loose just under the bridge, and for an age our world would be enveloped in dense white cloud. After the train had gone we would wipe the sooty residue from our faces.

The second walk took us in the opposite direction, to the village. And there we would see them: men in invalid carriages, one with a hole where his ear had been, another with an open hole in his forehead. There were younger men too – men with white sticks and eye patches, back from the Korean war. There was a large war veterans' home in the village. Nanny said these crumpled humans were 'shell shocked'. They frightened me, and I wanted to know what had caused those holes, but Nanny's *Daily Sketch* seemed to have left her more comfortable talking about the royal family.

While hints of war lay around many corners, there was also the balmy, backlit sense of security that the harvest and the annual crop of Cox's orange pippins from the orchard yielded. The reaper binder tossed the corn, and men made stooks in the field beyond the herbaceous border. The wind caught the scent of the magnolia on the terrace wall, and bumblebees hovered around the delphiniums. My distant parents seemed at times to display more affection for plant life than for us, while in her own way Nanny loved us as if we had been her own. The contrasts of my childhood world mirrored those in the life of my family.

My father's lack of experience in the trenches was more than compensated for at the dining table by the exchange of verbal grenades with my older brother Tom from behind *The Times*. For as long as I can remember, Tom was on the warpath. He was a revolutionary almost as soon as he knew the meaning of the word, and his targets were my parents. Tom was to become a lifelong committed trade union official, representing some of the lowest-paid people in the country. From an early age he asserted that he

intended to break with family tradition. For three centuries each eldest son had fathered a son, and each George had named that son Tom; each Tom had followed suit with George. But this Tom was most assertively never going to call any son of his George.

The Toms and Georges from three hundred years dominated the walls not only of the dining room of our home, but the drawing room to boot. Most prominent of all the portraits was that of my grandfather, Lieutenant General Sir Thomas D'Oyly Snow KCB, KCMG, who hung scowling above the dining-room mantel. I never ate a boiled egg that he didn't seem to have inspected. He was a massive presence in the home, despite having died seven years before I was born. My father spoke of him with reverence and not a little fear. My brother Tom regarded him as a monster, 'one of so many in the ruling classes who had led their unsuspecting serfs to wholesale slaughter'.

From time to time our table warfare would be joined by my first cousin Peter – destined one day to lead many a sandpit war for both ITN and the BBC. Peter was ten years older than I, and in a better position to take Tom on. His father was a serving Brigadier, and Peter himself possessed more than a streak of the old General, our mutual grandfather, in his make-up. His main contribution to the table tensions was at critical moments to reach for, and upset, the overfull and highly unstable sugarbowl, scattering the stuff across the entire battlefield. Whereupon, of course, hostilities had to be suspended while Nanny was summoned to clear it all up.

Throughout the First World War General Tom, like so many of his time, had resisted mechanisation, believing in the value of the horse long after the tank had come to stay. I was perhaps six years old when my father recounted how his father had gone to Khartoum in 1885, after the failed attempt to break the siege in which General Gordon had been surrounded for ten months by the Mahdi. Tom had arrived too late to prevent Gordon's shooting on the steps of his residence, but soon enough to acquire a chunk of the step upon which he'd died and to cart it home. It was to languish in his home at 3 Kensington Gate in London until the Blitz struck the house in

1940 and the 'Gordon step' was rendered indistinguishable from the rest of the rubble.

As far as I could divine as a child, General Tom had been knighted twice, at least once for leading a retreat. Commanding the Fourth Division during the First World War, it seems his actions in sorting out the retreat from Mons in 1915 saved many lives. My brother Tom of course preferred to dwell on the lives the great man had caused to be lost, and of these there must indeed have been very many. General Tom was a large and austere man who ended his days in a hand-operated invalid carriage. His horse had been shot from beneath him in 1917, smashing his pelvis. He was probably one of the last British generals ever to ride a horse into battle.

Further round the dining-room walls from my grandfather the General hung the family black sheep. He was a yet earlier Tom, who had made a killing of a somewhat different kind from the South Sea Bubble in 1720. He had presided over Snow's Bank, which stood on the street named after him to this day, Snow Hill on the edge of the City of London. Of this Tom little was said – so little indeed that at one point I thought he was such a black sheep that he was in fact black. Either it was a very dirty painting, or he appeared to be of an unusually dark complexion, with black curly hair.

There was no representation of my mother's family anywhere in the house. Like everything else about her, her forebears stayed obscurely in the background. The most interesting thing about her father, my maternal grandfather, Henry Way, was that he had been born in 1837 and sired her at the age of seventy-three. He was an estate agent in Newport, on the Isle of Wight. My mother was the last of nine children born to Henry's three wives, two of whom died in childbirth. Her eldest half-brother was fifty years older than she was.

Beneath the daunting images in the dining room, our family gathered for prayers at the start of every day. Adamson the butler, his wife the cook – always known as 'Addy' and 'Mrs Ad' – and Nanny Rose would join us three boys, my mother and the eternal conductor of this solemn moment, my father. We would stand in

line in order of importance. Mrs Ad always saw to it that her husband came at the end of the line. She was a formidable woman who regarded herself and Nanny Rose as at least as good as those they served. Poor Mrs Box, who did the cleaning, and Mr Webster – 'Webby' – the gardener, didn't get a look-in. They were so far below stairs they never even got to glimpse the dining-room floor until it came to cleaning it or bringing in the logs.

'Our Father, which art in heaven . . .' intoned my father. This formal, ordered start to the day, which included the collect and a brief reading from the Bible, was part of the absolute security and order amid which I grew up. From the moment I could stand, I was in that line for prayers at eight in the morning, prompt. Then, while my mother and father and Tom took to the large oval dining table, my brother Nick and I, always referred to as 'the little ones', would go to the folding square table in the corner. My father would erect a home-made newspaper stand and settle to reading *The Times*. Tom would sneer at some upside-down headline that he'd caught from his vantage point, and the first salvoes would be exchanged. Sometimes, on a really good day, my mother would burst into tears, pleading with Tom to stop. 'Your father is right, Tom, he's not to be upset,' she would cry. Sometimes the fusillades would be so frightening that Nick and I would cry too, and then the proceedings would have to be halted as we were ushered from the room for making too much noise.

Happy days were those when some preacher or family friend had come to stay. This invariably stilled the warfare. Tom would be on his most charming behaviour. There was Aunt Rhoda, my father's sister, who'd married and then been immediately widowed by Alec Begg, a hugely rich New Zealander thirty years her senior whom she'd met on a cruise. She would talk of war, and how safe New Zealand would have been to live in had her husband not died. She was over six feet tall, thin as a birch sapling and mad as a March hare. She lived on her beloved Alec's money in a series of rambling hotels along the south coast. When she came to stay, we ragged her rotten.

My father had another sister, Mary. Confusingly she was called Sister Mary, and looked like a seriously overgrown penguin. At some stage the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, conferred an MA on her, allowing her to enjoy the title 'Church of England's top nun'. She must surely have been the tallest. Over six foot like her siblings, she visited only rarely, and then eternally adorned in her white head-dress and black habit. Deeply austere, she would talk of high-flown ecclesiastical matters with my father, and of little else to any of the rest of us.

Among the many preachers who came to stay were people like the Bishop of Bradford, Donald Coggan, one day to become Archbishop of Canterbury. Dad was an excellent Bishop-spotter. He always seemed to know who was on the up. This mattered because, as was often discussed at the table, my parents assumed that he would sooner or later be 'preferred' and elevated to some bishopric or deanery before his time as headmaster came to a close. Because Ardingly College was part of a religious foundation of schools, he was required to be both teacher and ordained churchman. Even as a child, the 'Church' felt to me like something of a war machine. The Church militant seemed to have an officer class – plenty of generals, with suitable quantities of gold braid – and my father was somehow, one day, bound to take his place in their ranks.

Among the big-shot visitors who came to stay were people of genuine humility. Standing out from all others was Father Trevor Huddleston, who was at the forefront of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. His Church seemed to be the total opposite to my father's, although of course it was the very same Anglican. Father Trevor wore a habit with a rope around the middle. His sandals were open, and I clearly remember his knobbly toes peering at me from beneath the dining-room table. My father was taken with his simplicity and holiness. I cannot imagine that he had a clue about Father Trevor's politics. Certainly he never raised with us the suffering of Africa or anywhere else. It was through Trevor Huddleston, sitting at his knee at the age of six, that I first learned about Africa, and about an unequal world very far from the one

implied by Tom Snow's portrait above the mantel. 'One day, my boy, you must come to South Africa,' he said. 'You'd be amazed by the people, by the villages, the animals. You could come with me on my rounds.' I was to know Trevor on and off from my earliest childhood until his death in 1998.

These visits, when the outside world would come to call, were sadly all too rare. For the most part we were oblivious to what lay beyond the long trains that snaked across the viaduct in the far distance of our Ardingly world. If we did go to Haywards Heath we were barred from entering Woolworth's: 'You may catch something,' my mother would warn. Likewise the cinema – I didn't see a film until I was thirteen, a double bill of *Genevieve* and *Doctor in the House*.

My father listened to the BBC Home Service on the 'wireless' in his study, or to the BBC Third Programme in the drawing room. He was captivated by electronics. As a master at Eton College in the 1920s he had been the first member of staff to possess an electrically driven gramophone, and one of the earliest with a crystal wireless receiver. By the early 1950s, before the dawn of stereophonic reproduction, he had built a vast contraption out of light oak and plaster of Paris and set it in a corner of the drawing room. This was a state-of-the-art Voight mono loudspeaker. The sound came up from the belly of the beast, and was thrown up through an enormous plaster trumpet. It would then hit the canopy above and be splayed out into the centre of the room – theoretically, at least. I have no vivid memory of the sound, save that it was very loud, but the appearance was of a glorified ice-cream stand on Brighton pier.

We had no television. Indeed, until the coronation of the Queen in 1953, I had no idea that there was such a thing. Our neighbour in the adjoining part of the school had just purchased one. Derek Knight was a housemaster. He lived alone and chain-smoked Senior Service cigarettes, which stained his long fingers orange-brown and made his sitting room stink of tobacco. His entire existence seemed to centre on cigarettes. My mother had smoking in common with

him, and had rather a soft spot for him. She did motherly things like darning his pullovers. One day he called us in to observe a new invention. An enormous walnut cabinet stood in the corner. It had a little window in the middle, with a couple of brown Bakelite knobs beneath it and a lot of wire hanging out of the back. This was my first sighting of a television set. I couldn't really make it out. After all, I had never seen a moving picture.

Shortly before this I had been taken on my first trip to London, to see the preparations for the coronation. I remember a hot, sunny May day. The roof of the Hudson was fully down. As we approached Buckingham Palace through thronging crowds we passed open dustcarts full of workmen throwing boiled sweets. I caught one. 'Don't eat that, Jonathan,' my mother chimed from the front seat. 'You don't know where it's been.'

In the smelly, uncomfortable safety of Derek Knight's sitting room, the thick brown woollen curtains were drawn against the summer sun. Ten or twelve of us craned at the little window to watch the great Coronation Day on 2 June 1953. The picture was a series of greys. It appeared to be snowing in London. From time to time I could detect a carriage, a white-gloved hand, and lots of men in ridiculous clothes. 'This will never catch on,' said my father of the walnut-facia'd contraption, and marched us out long before the service was over. The little window was certainly very small, and the picture indistinct, but to me it was still very intriguing.

Monarchy and the royal succession matched war as part of the background to my childhood world. The third fixed point was my parents' marriage. Yet even here, war had played a role. In 1942, in addition to being the unpaid auxiliary fire chief and air raid marshal, my father was chaplain of Charterhouse School. This was an institution some notches higher up the league of English fee-paying schools than Ardingly, to which he was to move as headmaster in the year of my birth. In his role as a cleric he would go occasionally to the neighbouring YMCA, and it was in the canteen there that he encountered Joan Way, serving tea from a large urn. She was thirty, he was forty. In the extensive scrapbooks in which he recorded

his life I can find no hint of a woman until that night. Indeed, my father, the indefatigable scoutmaster and housemaster, seems to have been far more interested in boys. That is not to say that he was a homosexual. More a self-obsessed man – he called his scrap albums 'Ego books' – he seems to have spent his holidays in the company of some of the boys he had taught. He and they built and maintained a narrow boat on the Grand Union Canal.

My mother's arrival in the 'Ego book' is sudden, and comes with their engagement. George, the seasoned bachelor, proposed within three weeks of meeting Joan, and married her six weeks later. 'That's how it was in those days,' my mother told me. 'We were so conscious that we might not even survive the war.' The engagement was so short that my father did not realise that my mother had no hair of her own. She had to tell him on the day he proposed to her that she had suffered an attack of *alopecia totalis* at the age of thirteen, after sitting her exams for the Royal College of Music. Her hair had fallen out over three nights, and never came back. 'Your father was an absolute saint,' she would say. 'He asked for twenty-four hours to think about it after I told him, and he said he'd marry me anyway.' This defined her status thereafter: her life was dedicated to his every need. It was a status which defied the reality that she was a concert-grade pianist who had studied composition with Herbert Howells, one of the great influences on twentieth-century English classical music. She knew as much about music as my father did about the Bible.

For us, growing up with George and Joan, the lodestar was the war. Nothing was ever quite so good or quite so bad as it had been 'during the war'. Deeply conservative, they both worshipped order, an order in which everyone knew their place. Yet my father was not entirely conventional, for in addition to his love of the electronic he had a passion for fast American cars. Apart from this, in contrast to the absolutely dominant role America was to assume in my own life, George never went there, and he expressed little or no interest either in the place or its people. In his mind Britain still ruled the world.

The elevation from his 1920 Buick to the Hudson took place before I was born. The Hudson Essex Terraplane Eight was a rare beast indeed. Only six were ever made, and this one had been on the Hudson stand at the New York Motor show in 1931. Twenty-eight horsepower, she had a long bonnet and a very flat, almost unusable boot. My father had found and purchased the car through *Exchange & Mart*. In British terms, the Terraplane was like a cross between a Bentley and an MG. The dashboard looked like something from a makeshift cockpit: my father had installed an altimeter, a gradiometer and various other gadgets. The car was his greatest material joy. We would shop in it, pick up logs in it and go on holiday in it, squashed in the back, towing a vast caravan behind. My poor mother had to lash her wig down with tightly knotted headscarves.

One day in 1956 my father upped and sold the Hudson for £70 without warning. That was the moment that I discovered we were at war again. Our enemy this time was not Hitler, but someone called Nasser. It seemed funny to me how enemy leaders always seemed to end in '–er'. Ration books were back for petrol, and I was reduced to riding to school on the back of my mother's bike. My father regarded Anthony Eden, the Prime Minister who had precipitated the Suez crisis, as a 'good egg'. Many others thought he was unhinged. Certainly we now know that he was on a cocktail of antidepressant and other drugs at the time. With his white hair, tall good looks and white moustache, Eden seemed very much out of the top drawer.

I was too young to grapple with the full story, but according to my father, 'This man Nasser, President of Egypt, has taken it upon himself to seize the Suez Canal, which we built, and will have to be dealt with.' Washington, for once, saw the adventure for what it was, and provided the pressure which forced the British, French and Israelis to withdraw. The Anglo-French attempt to flash the flaccid tail of empire had failed. All I knew was that our world had retreated still further into the Sussex countryside. There was another consequence too, for Suez delivered a new Prime Minister.

From time to time on a Sunday evening I would go with my

parents to 6.30 evensong in the school chapel. Sitting alone across the gangway, rather stooped, would be an old man in a tweed coat. One Sunday after Suez, my father introduced me to him. 'This is the Prime Minister, Jonathan,' he said.

I shook the man's hand and looked up into rather sad eyes and drooping eyebrows. 'Do you know what a Prime Minister is, young man?' Harold Macmillan asked me.

'Something to do with the Queen?' I suggested. 'Are you married to her?'

'Good Lord, no!' chortled Macmillan. 'One day you might like to be a politician. That's what I am.' With that he got into the waiting Humber and purred away to his huge country home, Birch Grove, just beyond Ardingly village. Little was I to know that Macmillan's wife Dorothy was probably at that very moment in bed with the scoundrel Tory MP Bob Boothby, with whom she maintained a torrid affair throughout her husband's premiership. Perhaps this strikingly sad man gained solace from the chapel services while she found hers between the sheets.

The only good politician in my father's house was a Tory politician. Labour never got a look-in. My father's Christian faith did not extend to embracing the birth of the welfare state. His faith *was* the Tory party at prayer: war, Conservatism and Anglicanism were the trinity upon which my father's philosophy was founded.

My mother never dissented from my father's view; if anything she was even more conservative. But my relationship with her was of an altogether different texture. I enjoyed her femininity, her Blue Grass scent, her pearls, tweed skirts and Jacqmar scarves. It was not until I was eight that her greatest burden, the loss of her hair, was shared with me. Consequently she was reserved, and never let me clamber about her or run my fingers through what I still thought of as her hair. It was not until after my father's death twenty years later that she discussed her loss of hair openly.

The piano was our thread of contact throughout my childhood. My mother was a wonderfully bold performer, in stark contrast to the retiring role she played within the family. Her long, slender,

beautifully manicured fingers ranged powerfully across the keys as she played her beloved Brahms. She did not play often, and never without sheet music. I longed for her to extemporise and light upon some of the tunes I knew. She never did. Instead, from perhaps the age of four I began to pick up themes from her playing, and hummed or sang along with her. I was concerned that my brothers, who spent their time buried in my father's workshop soldering solenoids, might tease me for this, but gradually, by the age of about seven, I began to sing with more gusto. It was in this activity alone that my mother revealed her most demonstrative maternal delight. Her eternity ring would clink about on the ivories as I, who could only vaguely decipher the clusters of notes on the page, waited for the nod that would signal me to turn it.

'I say, Joan.' It was my father calling out from behind *The Times* one day at breakfast.

'Yes, darling?'

'There's a notice here about a voice trial at Winchester Cathedral to select new choristers. Shall we put the boy in for it?'

So began an intensive few weeks of arpeggios, harmonics and music theory. On the appointed day in April 1956 I turned up at Dumb Alley, a musty rehearsal room in the Winchester Cathedral Close where all the choir practices were held. Almost immediately I found myself standing next to the seated figure of the man who would be my choirmaster for the next five years, the aptly named Alwyn Surplice. After a rendition of the carol 'Oh Little Town of Bethlehem', I was in. I became a choral scholar at the Pilgrim's School in the cathedral close.

My father was visibly pleased with my achievement. 'You can have anything you want, under a pound,' he announced. This was an extravagant gesture for him, in response to my saving him some severe school fees for the next five years. It was well after five o'clock as we headed for the shops. 'You don't need to spend it now,' he said. But I wanted it right now, quick, before the shops closed at 5.30. Instant gratification, when we found the toyshop, came in the shape of a pale-blue Dinky Toy car transporter. It

cost sixteen shillings and sixpence – no mean sum in those days.

Within three months I had arrived at Pilgrim's School as a very full-time boarder, my holidays truncated and term times extended by saints' days and high days, for which the sixteen members of the choir had to be present even when the other boys had gone home for vacations. The parting from Ardingly, treehouses, warfare with my brothers, music with my mother, was unutterably painful. At eight years old, I felt abandoned and inadequate. 'He can't do up his shoelaces, you know,' my father had called over his departing shoulder to my new headmaster. Yet within weeks I found myself becoming part of the medieval weft and weave of the cathedral. Snaking across the close two or three times a day, we sixteen choristers were with Trollope, and Trollope was with us. We had stepped into history and joined with the characters of Barchester: dry old Canon Lloyd, with long strands of oily black hair draped across his naked pate; fat, jolly Canon Money, who didn't seem to have any because his cassock was full of holes; and deliciously eccentric Dr Lamplugh, Bishop of Southampton, who still had a Christmas tree in the hallway of his house come July. These were the decaying generals of the Church militant, presided over by learned Dean Selwyn and the remote Bishop of Winchester, Bishop Williams. We choristers were in thrall to Alwyn Surplice, our organist and choirmaster, who smacked the backs of our hands with a ruler whenever he wanted better of us.

The fingers of Alwyn Surplice's right hand had become closely clustered as a result of years of Morse-tapping and top-secret code-breaking at Bletchley Park during the war. This heroic condition was said to excuse the occasional duff notes in his organ playing. In reality, he played the organ like a demon. Practically all the staff at the school had been to the war. Principal amongst them was the dashing Rodney Blake, who was to run off to New Zealand with the piano teacher, deserting a wife with large ankles and two children, to the scandalised gossip of the cathedral close. Rodney taught me a love of the English language in general, and of the adjective in particular. He was a man full of mystery who had served on ships

in the Atlantic, and his stories of derring-do had me ready for action any time.

I soon discovered that the entire cathedral was a kind of mausoleum to unbroken centuries of the direst conflict. Right in between the choir stalls where we sang lay the second proper King of England, William Rufus, with an arrow in his back. High on the side screens that led to the rood screen above the high altar were funny-coloured boxes in which the powdery remains of even earlier Kings lay, among them Canute and Ethelred the Unready. There was hardly a man interred in the building who had died peacefully in his bed.

On either side, all the way down the nave, the transepts were festooned with officers who had died from Afghanistan to Zanzibar. The two World Wars seemed to have taken half the population of Hampshire with them. Everywhere there were memorials incorporating guns, cannon, stone-cast flags, swords and worse. Every day we were amongst this stone-entrenched certainty of war. To crown it all, the great west window stood testament to the results of a cannonball fired by Oliver Cromwell from the hill overlooking the cathedral. Every piece of glass in it had been smashed and rescued. The result was a jumble that left a cat's head on a slice of human armour, a sword under the upside-down leg of a horse. Even the language of faith included words like 'defender', 'sword', 'shield', 'armies' and 'victory'.

Outside the cathedral, school in term time was a Dickensian nightmare: ghastly food, sour milk in small bottles, a potted sick-like substance called 'sandwich spread' on curling bread, regular beatings, cold showers and endless inspections of our fingernails. The headmaster, Humphrey Salway, was a former Guards officer with a fearsome capacity to inflict psychological and physical pain, the latter at the hand of a wooden 'butter pat'. This was a flat, spade-like object with a leather tassel attached. It had the facility to produce blue-black weals on your buttocks, laced with red slashes. We would stand in line in our shivering pyjamas outside the headmaster's study after being caught talking after lights-out in dormitory. The decision as to whether or not we would be beaten was entirely

arbitrary. If we were, we would not be able to sit painlessly for a week or more. In a very rare act of theft, at thirteen years of age, I stole the butter pat on my last day at the school. I have often thought of old Salway, on the threshold of inflicting a sound beating, marauding around his study searching for the weapon and failing to find it. These days his motives would be questioned, but then he was a celebrated and feared figure in the cathedral close.

On 8 June 1958 I was summoned home from school to meet the Queen and Prince Philip. This was a huge event. The whole of the downstairs of the house had been decorated. The lavatory – euphemistically called 'the garden room' – where my father sat reading the traditionalist magazine *Time & Tide* for unreasonable quantities of time had been gutted and refitted against the possibility that one of Their Majesties would need a pee. My mother had made a special trip to Harrods in London to secure two Crown Derby cups and saucers from which the royal lips could sip tea.

The Queen and Prince Philip had opened Crawley New Town and Gatwick Airport in the morning, and were now descending upon Ardingly as part of the school's centenary. Suddenly my father and mother were not in their usual posts at the top of the social tree. The Queen's secretary, Sir Edward Ford, whom my father had taught at Eton, arrived early to see that all was in order. My father spoke of Harold Macmillan having played a part in securing the moment.

At 3 p.m. prompt, the biggest Rolls-Royce I'd ever seen steamed through the archway and onto the quadrangle in front of our house. My brothers and I stood at the top of the steps outside the front door. Our hands were shaken. The Queen was rather small, pleated, hatted and stiff. The Duke of Edinburgh burbled, but I couldn't understand what he said. Then they were inside, and I began to think about the garden room. Even if not sitting there, the royal bottoms must by now be sitting on some of the cushions that I knew and loved so well.

Soon the Queen was gone, and I was on the train back to Winchester. Mr Salway treated me briefly like a conquering hero. At breakfast the next day I was allowed to sit next to his wife Lorna, a warm and affectionate woman who let me eat her fresh toast and marmalade instead of the usual soggy white bread and spread. But very soon normal sadistic services were resumed by her husband. This was, after all, term time.

Yet once the holidays dawned and the 'ordinary' boys went home it would be all smiles, and we sixteen who constituted the choir were never tyrannised or beaten. We were cast loose upon the town to spin out our tiny five-shilling budgets. We had absolute freedom in those days, and gained absolute sympathy too. We were spoilt rotten, people in both school and town taking pity upon us for our enforced separation from our families as we lingered on to service Christmas, Easter, Ascension and the rest. These days sowed a love of music and of the cathedral, and if not of religion, certainly of peace and contemplation in a great building. But they were also central to the destruction of our family lives. Holidays amounted to only four or five weeks a year for the five years of my time at Winchester. My father was so rarely encountered, I called him 'sir' by mistake.

From this familial wreckage emerged a confident, independent child of thirteen – primed for adolescence, or so I was indirectly told. For Humphrey Salway's parting shot was an obscure account of the 'facts of life'. These centred on the 'golden seed', which at some point I was going to wake up and find in my bed. Beyond rust spots inflicted by the mattress springs beneath, though I searched, I grew up minus 'golden seed'. Indeed, I left the choir school with my voice still unbroken.

The letter to my father from Number Ten Downing Street arrived at Ardingly just before I returned there from my last day at Pilgrim's: 'The Queen has been graciously pleased to appoint you Bishop Suffragan of Whitby.' The signature at the bottom read 'Harold

Macmillan, Prime Minister'. The new Archbishop of York, in whose domain my father's territory lay, was to be his friend Donald Coggan. All my father's ducks were in a row, and the longed-for preferment had come on the very eve of his retirement from Ardingly. The Church, political, militant, ecclesiastical and old-boy network, had done its stuff, and we were all thrilled. We now had a new status in life, and after Ardingly a grand new home in darkest North Yorkshire.

The Old Rectory in South Kilvington, with its own little Saxon church in the garden, was as near paradise as the Brontës would have dared imagine. My new bedroom looked south and west over the garden. I was not to pass much time there, but I spent enough in that first summer to talk hungrily with the remarkable octogenarian who tended the garden. Joe Clarke had only ever left Kilvington once in his life, and that was to go to Egypt in the First World War to dig pit latrines for victory. Joe was conscripted into the First City of London Sanitary Corps. Wherever Allied man had to do his duty, Joe was there to facilitate the needs of the lower bowel. He served for five years. 'I tell you, master Jon, I had to give up on digging the waste to bury the dead, there was that many.' Joe, who had dug his way through Europe after Egypt, burying the war dead, now dug his way through the Old Rectory's rhododendrons. The carnage of the Great War was fifty years before, but Joe's memories were as vivid as if it were yesterday.

I wanted nothing more than to garden and learn with Joe, but I had a music exhibition to St Edward's, a minor fee-paying school in Oxford. The headmaster, Frank Fisher, was the son of yet another prelate, Geoffrey, Archbishop of Canterbury. He took pity on my father's high-born impecuniousness and secured me an ill-deserved cut in fees in the form of a choral exhibition. So on the one hand here was Joe giving me the side of war from the ranks, of which my family knew nothing, while through my father I was able to observe the insidious methods of the upper classes in securing hegemony in matters military, educational, ecclesiastical, even episcopal.

Three Bishops were 'done' on the day my father was consecrated

in York Minster, and a grand affair it was. Eight feet tall in his mitre, my father was every inch a Bishop. The Whitby nuns had toiled through the nights to spin and embroider his voluminous cope. The silversmiths had beaten his pectoral cross and crosier out of some dead Bishop's leftover silverware. Fully adorned, my father was some spectacle; and the minster bounced with sound and colour.

It was as an innocent abroad that I arrived at St Edward's, a seriously Victorian environment. The first three weeks were spent mugging up for an initiation test, essentially a compendium of names and concepts that were peculiar to the school: 'chaggers' for changing rooms, 'beaks' for masters, 'boguls' for bicycles, and some ludicrous piece of ironwork on the chapel roof was 'the boot scraper'. Sixteen years after the Second World War, here was an institution still ordered around the ball and the gun. Games were everything, and when we weren't playing rugby, we were square-bashing in full uniform on the parade ground.

I didn't mind playing games, although my gangling form meant that my brain seemed to be too far from the extremity of my limbs. Messages as to when to kick the ball failed to connect adequately with the foot in question. In short, my hand–eye co-ordination was abominable. Watching games left me both physically and mentally cold. Yet the pseudo-military hierarchy of the place depended on hero-worshipping those who excelled in games. Because I failed to watch, or worse failed to concentrate when I was watching, I failed hopelessly at the hero-worshipping. When matches were being played I preferred to hide in the art room and paint, or strum on the piano in a practice room.

One day after a rugby match, still only fourteen years old, I returned to the day room, where perhaps twenty 'horseboxes' were arranged around the walls. The 'horsebox' was your own personal space – a small contained area with a seat, a desk, shelves, and somewhere to stick up pictures of Mummy, Daddy and the dog.

On this particular day I made towards my horsebox, only to find that it was completely naked – the curtain, the photos, books, cushions, possessions, all gone. Suddenly I was jumped on from behind by half a dozen of the other horsebox-dwellers. Grabbed by the hair, I was shoved into the large wastebin in the corner. In the bin already were Mummy, Daddy and the dog, all ripped to shreds, while Quink ink and the Blanco used for greening our military webbing had been smeared on what remained of my precious possessions.

The bullying was institutionalised. The housemaster, a shy, dysfunctional bachelor, lived next door to our day room, and must surely have heard all the noise. Sexual activity between the boys was also commonplace. Boys were talked about as sexual objects. Blond, blue-eyed newcomers – as I had been – were trouble from the outset, importuned by bigger boys for mutual masturbation. I remember how a prefect in the neighbouring boarding house, who was building a canoe in the basement, lured me down to see it. Before I realised it, he had his hand down my trousers, and demanded mine down his. Fagging, or acting as unpaid servant, was almost as exploitative as the sex. I fagged for a diminutive seventeen-year-old prefect who demanded that the insteps of his shoes be polished so they would glisten when he knelt for communion. It was a rocky and wretched introduction to adolescence, so far from Nanny and the backlit fields of stooks that I still dreamt of from childhood. Yet it also made me political, and made me yearn, if only subconsciously, for change, and later to campaign for it. Some of us went under. I remember one boy called Prythurch – I never knew his first name – who was teased mercilessly for his pink National Health spectacles. One term he simply never came back.

Academically, I was a failure. In a sense, the teaching mirrored the sport. If the school decided you were bright, you secured the best teachers, and were pushed. If you were deemed 'thick', you got either the rugby coaches who had to fulfil their teaching quota, or the straightforwardly unemployable. One of these was Stan Tackley. Stan was perhaps the most boring and uninterested teacher of Latin,

English and French of his generation, and I had him for all three subjects. He taught with an elderly, flatulent golden Labrador at his feet.

My year with Stan and his dog Brandy delivered me bottom in Latin, bottom in English, and bottom in French. I was in the bottom fifth form, 5f; my brother Nick, two years my junior, was already ahead of me in 5b. Things were looking bad, and my father took me into his study when I returned home. 'Sonny,' he said, causing me to wonder if he used the word because he couldn't tell which of us was which, as we had been away so long, 'Sonny, your mother and I have decided you should leave St Edward's and become apprenticed at Dorman Long in Middlesbrough.'

'Crumbs,' I said. 'Me a steelworker?' Dorman Long had a vast series of steelworks on Teesside, and my father admired the heavy industry in his diocese, never having been exposed to it before. 'One more year, Dad,' I pleaded. When I returned to school, Stan was still teaching me some classes, but fewer of them.

In the afternoons, Stan was Major Tackley, and ran the Combined Cadet Force. The school would suddenly become a sea of khaki and air-force blue. Boys would run about brandishing bolt-action Lee Enfield guns. We were tutored in war. The staff's wartime exploits were the iconography of discourse at the dinner table. But no member of staff could hold a candle to the school's most famous old boys. These included Guy Gibson VC, who led the original 'Dam Busters' raids against German dams and was one of the greatest pilots of the Second World War, but died in action, and the legendary Group Captain Douglas Bader DSO, of 242 Squadron, RAF, who was very much alive, but literally legless. Bader was a living legend who had had both legs amputated when his fighter plane crashed during a stunt. He fought back to fly again in combat, wearing artificial pins.

Now, in the early 1960s, he would rock around the school grounds, stickless and unaided, a lesson to us all. He had no job there, he was just a professional old boy. Bader in many ways typified the politics of the school. If they were ever mentioned, the Labour Party, the burgeoning 'Ban the Bomb' anti-nuclear movement,

socialism and, of course, Communism were the enemies of what we were about. It was a political culture that chimed with that of my parents.

My first memory of an ambition was indeed, at the age of fifteen, to be a Tory MP. Whether this aspiration derived from my early brush with Macmillan or from the school I don't know, but it was certainly there. My sense of the outside world depended almost exclusively on the *Daily Mail*. We were only allowed the radio on Sundays, when we would listen to *Forces' Favourites*, yet another reminder that all over the world there were British troops ranged against 'the enemy'. Otherwise we listened to Radio Luxembourg, the only pop station then in being. We had no access to television. So our knowledge of world events was narrow in the extreme.

I was fifteen at the time of the Cuban missile crisis. Bearded Castro, dictator of Cuba, and bald-headed Khrushchev, leader of the Soviet Union, were depicted as exceptionally unpleasant and dangerous men. Never more so than when the latter repeatedly banged his shoe on a desk at the UN General Assembly in New York in October 1960. By contrast the handsome and clean-shaven American President, John F. Kennedy, couldn't put a foot wrong. And Harold Macmillan had by now been transmogrified into 'Super Mac'. The argument that Cuba might need Russia's nuclear missiles to guard against, or even stave off, another American invasion was simply never made. Russia wanted to put her missiles on Cuba to attack America, that was the only interpretation we were ever offered. This was the Cold War, the East–West standoff.

As the missile crisis deepened, we went through our nuclear protection exercises on an almost weekly basis – under our desk lids, heads in the brace position. It wasn't until much later that I began to learn about the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, in which Kennedy had sent 1500 US-trained Cuban exiles to try to overthrow Castro. For a time the world was on the edge of the abyss of nuclear war, but I cannot pretend to have been aware of the true magnitude of it at the time.

By November 1963 the world had changed again. Adorned as a

woman, I was strutting my stuff on the school stage. I was playing Eva in Jean Anouilh's comedy *Thieves' Carnival*. Of my performance, the *Oxford Times* wrote: 'the only giveaway is the too-masculine stride'. On the twenty-second of that month my mother and father drove down to watch the play. Act One passed without incident, but something happened during the interval. Somehow members of the audience found out that Jack Kennedy had been shot, and was dying in a Dallas clinic. The belly laughs of the first half of the performance were not repeated in the second. There was much whispering and talking low. People scurried away at the end. It was as if innocence itself had been shot. My parents were overwhelmed with gloom. 'Super Mac' and Jack had bonded like father and son. There had been a new optimism abroad, a new sense of Camelot and magic. And now this spirit was all but dead.

With Kennedy gone, the wheels started coming off Macmillan's wagon. The sixties began to swing. The *Daily Mail* revelled in telling us who was having whom, and where and how. Suddenly the where was Cliveden, and the who was the Minister for War, John Profumo. Profumo, who had had the misfortune to make love to a woman who was already sleeping with a Russian diplomat named Ivanov, a Soviet spy, was unhorsed for being economical with the truth about the matter in the House of Commons. We boys, reading this stuff, simply couldn't believe it. The entire British Establishment had its collective trousers round its ankles, and we were thrilled by it. One day I would encounter John Profumo myself, in a very different guise.

We, with our posh accents, sneered at the Yorkshire-accented Harold Wilson, who became Labour Prime Minister in 1964 with a wafer-thin majority. But he won us over the moment he set fire to his jacket pocket with his pipe. Few other outside events impinged upon our lives. And then, one bleak winter's day in January 1965, Winston Churchill died. Every living Field Marshal and more than sixty world leaders, led by former US President Dwight D. Eisenhower, attended the funeral in St Paul's Cathedral on 30 January. Classes were abandoned for the day, and we were allowed to cluster around the few black-and-white television sets near the school. The

lying in state, the swarming crowds, the vast procession, the gun carriage and the service in St Paul's were all on an epic scale. Eisenhower, when he spoke, made my backbone tingle.

> I can presume to act as spokesman for millions of Americans who served with me and their British comrades during three years of war in this sector of the earth. To those men Winston Churchill was Britain . . . I, like all free men, pause to pay a personal tribute to the giant who now passes from among us . . . We say our sad goodbye to the leader to whom the entire body of free men owes so much . . . and now, to you, Sir Winston – my old friend – farewell!

We weren't to know it, but this was almost certainly one of the last times that collective America ever looked up to a politician who was not an American. One much later exception might prove to be Nelson Mandela, who at the time of Churchill's death had already been in prison for treason for over two years, and still had twenty-four more to go.

Churchill's coffin was borne by barge to Waterloo. Hearing on the wireless that it had departed for its final resting place at Bladon in Oxfordshire, hundreds of boys from the school set forth, swarming across the playing fields, down across the swing bridge on the Oxford canal and across to the side of the railway line on the edge of Port Meadow. There, exposed to the full might of the mad January wind, we stood in our grey-flannel uniforms and waited, straw boaters in our hands. Bladon was only ten miles up the line, close to Blenheim Palace where Churchill had been born. And then we heard it, far down the stilled line. Soon we saw the belching steam pumping into the brittle blue winter sky. Then the great Battle of Britain class locomotive was upon us. Irish Hussars flanked the catafalque. The sturdy, flag-draped coffin was clearly visible. We bowed our heads in genuine awe. As suddenly, it was gone. However brief, it was a passing of history that would inform my sense of Britain and America, and war, for the rest of my life.

* * *

America for me was still more than a decade away. That summer of 1966, at the age of eighteen, I went abroad for the first time with two friends from school. We bought a Bedford Dormobile for £50, converted it, and headed for Greece. Belgium, Germany, Austria and Yugoslavia yielded up an effortless tapestry of history and geography. More importantly, they generated a real thirst in me to go much further. It was that summer that confirmed in me the desire to spend a year in Africa or India, or some far-flung Pacific isle, to learn more about the world.

At the same time, having just left St Edward's with only one 'A' level – a C pass in English – I had to set about getting educated. That autumn I ended up at Scarborough Technical College, on the edge of my father's diocese. I was suddenly translated from dunce to intellectual. Fewer than twenty-five people out of the thousand at the college were taking 'A' levels at all; most were doing 'day release' courses in plumbing or bricklaying. Seven of us signed up to do law and economics at 'A' level. We had one lecturer, Bob Thomas, a wise and down-to-earth Welshman, and I learned more in a year with him than in five with the entire staff at St Edward's. He even saved me from a disastrous affair with a beguiling older member of the administrative staff. After I was spotted disappearing out of the grounds at lunchtimes in her car and coming back more than a little dishevelled, Bob sat me down and suggested that I had a long and successful life ahead of me, and that it might not be such a good idea to be caught *in flagrante* with a married woman on the Scarborough downs.

I left the Tech after only a year with two more 'A' levels, having done much to redress the ravages of private education on my confidence, ready to strike out into the world. My application to do Voluntary Service Overseas had been accepted. I was ready to go, but far less prepared than I knew.