Extracts for People's Book Prize

***This Was My England** the story of a Childhood*

Contents

Prologue page – v

CHAPTER 1
Two Very Different Families

On writing an autobiography – My birth – Maternal relatives – Paternal relatives – Mother – Father – Their early relationship – Their marriage – Tensions between the two families – My birth gives rise to a family quarrel and long-standing split
page – 1

CHAPTER 2
As a Toddler in London

The problem of my name – My cousins – My admiration for their family – My godparents – How my mother ingratiated herself with her in-laws – The unfortunate consequences of this to other relatives – My loathing for Muswell Hill – Haunted by irrational fears – My first love
page – 18

CHAPTER 3
A Sanctuary from War

My maternal grandparents' West country home – A life of freedom – My bad temper – An Old Dame's school – A perverse curiosity – My mother's broken promises "not to tell" – Days on the farm – Why I resolved never to attend school – Social life at Sampford Place, and my mother's relatives
page – 35

CHAPTER 4
Return to the Bombing

Am sent to a Convent school – Early infatuations – Ashmount and my father's relatives – Early disdain for the church environment – Biblical versus classical values – A cane is purchased – Its use as a punishment weapon – The bombing at night

page – 57

CHAPTER 5
To the West country Again

My brother and I are sent to the parish school – Life in wartime Melksham – Visits to relatives in Bath – Summer holidays in the War years
page – 71

CHAPTER 6
School and Life in London

At Norfolk House – School friends – Home life – Jane, the maid – The birth of Oliver and the employment of Miss Wall – How I came to judge my father – The neighbours – The influence of Arthur Mee – Nightmares and sleepwalking
page – 80

CHAPTER 7
The Inferno of Boarding School

Preparations for boarding school – I am deposited – Secret theft and violent robbery – The dyspeptic Matron – First day ceremonial and the Headmaster – Ritual torture – Poor standards of teaching – My clash with the Divinity master – A general election looms – Compulsive gangsterism – An end of term blasphemous concert is enjoyed by all
page – 93

CHAPTER 8
The Sadistic Head Boy

The Housemaster's appointee – Brutality encouraged by the housemaster's sister – The reluctant lover – The traitor and his punishment – My fight with Tuffield – His gunpowder accident – The Viking ghost – Class war in the school grounds – The consequences of an early morning quarrel
page – 107

CHAPTER 9
A Tutor and his Obsession

Woodbridge and its influence: a summary – The tutor's methods – His self-pity – The curriculum – His rages – I am falsely accused – I join the scouts – Communists in Muswell Hill – Why I avoid public conveniences – Unnecessary death of my maternal grandfather – The fear of socialist dispossession – I offer to forego my pocket money – The Labour government ensures the further enrichment rather the impoverishment of our family – Our new residence – How I broke with my brother

page – 118

CHAPTER 10
Back to Public School

My examination for Highgate – Jew-baiting at school – Causes of this – My affinity with the Jews – Inspirational teaching of History, English and Latin – An art work is condemned

page – 138

CHAPTER 11
My Escape into Literature

My psychological attachment to *The Three Musketeers* and the 17th century – Broadening interest in the classics – Illness and absence from school – The dreaded art lessons – The influence of the PT master – Visits to antiquarian bookshops – Holidays and other relatives in Swanage – Two new loves

page – 150

CHAPTER 12
The Conflicts of Home Life

Mabs, my father's friend – A suicide gesture – Jane, the maid – Pleasures of the pantomime – My father's contradictory attitudes on class and status

page – 163

CHAPTER 13
A New School and New Values

King Alfred School: its values and success – Its system of discipline – The psychological problems of social integration – The teaching of history – Ronald Fuller and English literature – Political interests and the debating society – Raphael Samuel and our differences

page – 172

CHAPTER 14
Love for an Actress

The beautiful Patricia Dainton – Psychological background for such an obsession – I seek personal advice for courtship – The first love letters – My mental condition – Revelations of the Journal

page – 190

CHAPTER 15
An Unsuccessful Mission

A family crisis over the wearing of spectacles – Details of my daily life and plans for courtship – First visit to Conduit street

page – 202

CHAPTER 16
A Gift for a Goddess

Schemes of murder – Am diverted by a Restoration drama – I speak with PD's mother – Second visit to Conduit street and the outcome

page – 214

CHAPTER 17
Gestures of Suicide

Preparations for the third visit – I meet Vivienne Black – A new plan followed by a desperate correspondence – Failure of my literary efforts – Attempts at self-injury – Suicide letters

page – 224

CHAPTER 18
Respite with my Grandmother

My grandmother moves to Bath – My wanderings in the city – Treats and outings – Visits to Hampton Hall – The move to my aunt and uncle – Attitudes to smoking – Character of Uncle Bill

page – 233

CHAPTER 19
The Misery of Home Life

The rebelliousness of my brother and his expulsion from home – The circumstances in which I and my youngest brother were eventually to break from our parents – Misery for all – The break-up for the foursome – Illness and hypochondria – Friendship with my cousin

page - 242

CHAPTER 20
A Violent Crisis Point is Reached

My confirmation and what it meant – Discovery of Miss Dainton's marriage – Dull days at stuffy Elmer Sands – A desperate scheme

page – 254

CHAPTER 21
The Problem of my Future

The collapse of my school work – School reports – Career advice from teachers and relatives – My father vetoes my preferences – The "nice" man at the Youth Employment Bureau

page – 264

CHAPTER 22
My Bath Relatives versus my Parents

Visit to Bath – The au pair Barbara – Our intellectual friendship – Aunt Inez suggests a stay in Germany – Plans are formulated – My parents opposition – My father's rudeness to Barbara – My Aunt's secret letter – Am forced into employment with T.G. Williams Ltd. – Am relieved to be sacked – My mother takes me to an interview

page – 274

CHAPTER 23
I enter the Legal World

An upstairs downstairs world of gossip – The varied staff – A question of class consciousness – How a legal mindset was to be of benefit in the future – My interest in jurisprudence

page – 288

CHAPTER 24
My Life in the West End

My continuing literary efforts – Theatre going – A Philosophy course – Strange visitors to the office – The Sergeant-Major loses his job – The arrival of Mr. Dawes – The Coronation – Love for a waitress

page - 298

CHAPTER 25
Old School Friends and Others

The Browns' new residence – A KAS function – Gilbert Harding – Passion for Miss Dainton revived – Attempts at the cure of pipe smoking – End of the PD affair – Assessments for military fitness – Osbourn and his Jewish girl friend – A spiritualist meeting – An evening with Richard Martin – Geoffrey Dunston and our doomed friendship – My grandfather's second marriage

page - 310

CHAPTER 26
An Ending and a New Beginning

How I ended my employment – A party at KAS – My *Apology* – Final parting – Christmas 1953 – Letters of thanks and good wishes – I join the Army

page – 321

Epilogue page – 331

CHAPTER 1
Two Very Different Families

> "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."
> Leo Tolstoy, opening words of *Anna Karenina*

On writing an autobiography – My birth – Maternal relatives – Paternal relatives – Mother – Father – Their early relationship – Their marriage – Tensions between the two families – My birth gives rise to a family quarrel and long-standing split

When life's work is done and tomorrow holds few prospects for the future, then memories may begin to take on a fresh clarity they had not done for many a year past. The reality of the past can then take on a sharper focus after a life of intense activity and perhaps too hopeful aspirations. This is to be expected, for in the struggle of daily life, it is only the present and the future which really matters. Howsoever the past may inescapably guide and direct our lives, the bustle and absorption of mundane existence ensures that pondering recollections are somehow kept at bay.

But with the onset of age, and the completion of life's task and the prospect of extinction, there is the need for a summing-up, a gathering in of all the loose ends, and a final report to explain if not to justify one's faults or failings, if not to the world at large, then at least to one's personal conscience. And as such a summing-up must be factual and chronological in building a structure from which the conclusions of others may be drawn, rather than comprising meandering reflections on arbitrarily chosen episodes, it must necessarily take on the form of an autobiography.

There are many ways in which an autobiography may be approached. It may be written from the perspective of one's public life, in which event private matters and personal thoughts take on a low profile; or it may be written purely to amuse by passing from one disconnected anecdote to another; or it may set out to portray an idealised self-portrait as one would like to be remembered; or it may recount a life as one would have wished to live; or it may studiously attempt to please one's nearest and dearest, whilst avoiding offence to anyone with whom one may have brushed shoulders throughout the course of life.

The autobiography which follows falls into none of the above categories. Its purpose is to record none other than the deepest and most long-lasting impressions of events and persons as they occurred at the time, shamelessly, and with little regard for my reputation or that of others. There is no way of reaching ultimate truth – if that is ever an imaginable possibility – and neither is it my primary intention, but if an

account of one's life is to approximate most closely to the truth, then it is only to be reached through throwing aside all inhibition or sense of self-regard in writing for one's own satisfaction alone. If absolute truth cannot be reached by such an approach, it is certain that absolute honesty can.

If an autobiography is to be truly candid, all sense of pride or status, or need to justify oneself before the world or a higher authority must be brushed aside, as one stands naked and undefended, to be disdained or ridiculed by those who would criticise or moralise according to their temperament. In the following memoir, only occasionally shall I attempt to interpret events if I so choose, preferring to leave the task of interpretation to those professional biographers who are bound to know more about the author than the author knows about himself.

The following therefore sets out to be a *memoir* or *confession* in the sense it is merely a record of memories, in conjunction with care to ascertain the accuracy of facts where documentation exists, and so no academic bookishness is allowed to intervene between immediate impressions and their written transfer to the page. Of course this may give rise to the occasional inaccuracy, but that is a task for those who are better placed than the author to uncover and correct, in revealing to a sometimes prurient readership a revision or re-working of what is believed to be the greater truth.

It needs to be borne in mind that the memory is fallible and liable to play all kinds of tricks, but that is no argument that an autobiography should attempt anything more than a *memoir* from the subjective viewpoint of its author in presenting the impressions of his own personality. If something more is preferred then that must be left to the insight of the professional biographer with his interpretational skills.

*

A life must begin with the author's background, and that means describing the origins of his family's circumstances. I was born at approximately 4.30 pm in the middle of a thunderstorm at 27 Welbeck Street, some ten minutes walk from Oxford Circus, on 23rd August 1935. George V was then King-Emperor, Stanley Baldwin was the Prime Minister, Franklin D. Roosevelt was the President of the USA, and Hitler had been Chancellor of Germany for some 18 months. I was bottle fed because that was most customary amongst the English middle classes in the 1930s. And besides, my mother was repulsed by the idea of breast feeding which she thought "primitive," and soon to be discarded by all classes with the "advance of civilisation." She once told me she disliked anyone to touch her breasts, and disdained as distasteful most kinds of physical contact.

As the eldest son of an eldest son, I was naturally born to be self-important and arrogant, and for the first six years of my life I had a vile temper, whilst being otherwise tortured by all kinds of fears and complexes. The arrogance shows through clearly in those photographs of my early years. On the

same day in the same exclusive West End nursing home, a son was born to the wife of the famous actor, Emlyn Williams.

My father's family was very different from my mother's, although both may have held an equal status in different ways. My father's family came from a business background, although at the time of my birth my closest relatives were all professional people, mostly in medicine, but the business mentality was so deeply entrenched that they represented the Protestant work ethic and the spirit of capitalism almost to the point of parody, and they were enriched as a consequence of this far beyond the evidence of their mean expenditure. My mother's family came from a service background, her father, John (Jack) Figgins (1868-1946), having been retired as a Royal Naval captain, and her maternal grandfather, Rear Admiral Bedbrook (1845-1902), had been a leading engineer and ship's architect, and the man who had fought successfully to raise the status of engineers in the Navy through the conferring of military rank in alignment with technical qualifications.

He had begun his career as one of the first midshipmen aboard HMS *Warrior*, Britain's first steel-hulled battleship (now a museum monument in dry dock in Portsmouth, nearby Nelson's flagship, HMS *Victory*), and he ended his career as Chief Inspector of Machinery, and was promoted from the humble title of "Mr." to Rear Admiral. I might add that no serving officer in the history of the Royal Navy did more to enhance the technological repute of those serving below deck, in the democratic struggle to equate skill with status, and in so doing he was a major contributor in ensuring British dominance on the oceans of the world in the decades ahead.

The relatives on both sides of my family were kind and considerate towards me, but I generally preferred the company of my mother's relatives, since although they were poorer financially, my maternal grandparents lived in a mansion in the West country which was richly furnished and surrounded by beautiful gardens. Despite two live-in maids and a gardener, my mother always complained about the "poverty" of her parents, in that they survived on a "miserable naval pension" and a small portfolio of shares. But where there was supposedly poverty, I only saw luxury and good living, and plenty of entertaining, for my grandmother was very sociable and hospitable, and loved laughter and merriment.

My paternal grandfather, Ernest Corfe (1878-1963), was the youngest of six children and brought up in Maidstone, where his family owned a chain of chemist stores which eventually were sold to Timothy Whites early in the 20th century, which in turn in the second half of the same century was acquired by Boots. Shortly after qualifying as a dental surgeon, he volunteered to serve as an Army captain in the Boer War, and was one of the first dental surgeons sent out to South Africa to attend to the appalling condition of the ordinary British soldiers' teeth. I still possess the spurs he wore at that time, for he spent much time on horseback, and he liked to tell stories of his adventures during the

course of that War. In 1905 he married my grandmother, Ethel Smith (1885-1951), a great beauty and the daughter of a well-to-do auctioneer in Norfolk. Her father was to meet a horrific death some years later, whilst taking his dog for a walk along the Norfolk coast, when the cliffs gave way, and both man and dog were found dead together on the beach.

My grandmother had one sister, Ruth, who remained a spinster, and two brothers, Sidney and Quentin, both of them eccentric and by profession valuation surveyors, and the latter a favourite great uncle on account of his comical behaviour. My grandparents moved into a newly built Edwardian London suburb, Muswell Hill, where my grandfather set up his dental practice, working 16 hours a day since he also acted as his own mechanic in making dentures. They had four children, Felix (1906-1990), my father, followed by Joan (1907-2006), Maurice (1910-1985), and a late arrival, Harold Martin (1922-1999).

My maternal grandfather, Jack Figgins, was from a far humbler background. His parents were both Scottish but resident in Crewe, Britain's largest railway junction, for my great-grandfather, James Russell Figgins (1841-1908), was a railway engineer who although he rose to a responsible and high managerial position, this did not carry with it any complementary class status in the eyes of southerners. I still remember his large portrait in oils which hung in an ornate gilded frame in my grandparents' dining room. He looked a grand well-dressed Victorian gentleman, grim-visaged, holding the Bible in one hand. My grandfather was, again, one sibling amongst eight others, and as he proved exceptionally bright at school, a distant relative came up with the resources to send him off to the Naval College at Dartmouth, which at that time only comprised a moored sailing vessel.

As a young officer and qualified engineer, my grandfather was ambitious both professionally and socially. On meeting my grandmother, an Admiral's daughter, he was determined to marry her – or so I was told by his future wife. My grandmother was the fourth daughter and one of ten children, several brothers of whom attended St. Paul's School, and one of these struck up a friendship with Walter de la Mare (1873-1956), who later became a noted writer and poet. He soon became a serious suitor to my grandmother, frequently visiting the Bedbrooks' family home in Battersea, and she often told me with pride about her love affair with the great writer, and how they were "destined to be married," but how my grandfather was so insistent in his courtship that she had finally to give way to his wishes, and they were married in 1898, he being older by 6 years.

My great-grandfather, the Admiral, was a man of great humanity with liberal feelings, and probably exerted little influence as to how his children should choose their spouses. My grandmother said she had never known him to strike any of his children except on a single occasion when the youngest son, Cyril, was rude to his mother. My great grandmother, Matilda A. Crocker

(1845-1907), came from South Africa and supposedly had a “murky” past which was concealed from the family, the “murkiness” being that she had been born out of wedlock. She, however, was the disciplinarian of the family, responsible for keeping the ten children in order whilst her husband concentrated on naval business in modernising the technology of the Senior Service.

My grandmother was born near the Naval base at Chatham dockyard, where she spent her early happy childhood, and only later did the family move to London. It was commonly said that the Admiral was finally struck down with appendicitis at the same time as Edward VII, and whilst the King survived, my great-grandfather died at the age of 57.

In 1902 my grandparents were fortunate to be stationed and living together in Malta with their 3-year old daughter, Inez, and my grandmother who was a talented singer up to operatic standard, was chosen to sing the leading role of Phoebe Meryll in Gilbert and Sullivan’s, *The Yeomen of The Guard* at the Theatre Royal in Valletta. The production was produced by the Malta Amateur Dramatic Society, of which General Sir Francis Grenfell, the Governor of Malta was the President, and Admiral Sir John Fisher, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean, was the Vice-President. The production was a great success and well-received in the local press, and my grandmother received a not inconsiderable fan mail from ordinary admirers – several letters of which have come into my possession. “Grandpa was so proud of me,!” she exclaimed many decades later. She told how some years before visiting Valletta she had dreamed of singing in just such a theatre with its red and white striped décor, and she marvelled at the prescience of such a prediction.

As personalities my maternal grandparents were possibly not ideally suited to one another. My grandmother enjoyed a lively social life and was always at ease in company, whilst my grandfather with his Scottish, and possibly Calvinist background, tended to be dour and serious. He was a man of few words, but with intellectual and literary interests, and with a knack for learning foreign languages. He was fluent in German, acting as an interpreter on foreign exchange visits with the German Imperial Navy, and had a knowledge of Chinese where he was based for three years towards the end of the 19th century. He was certainly a disciplinarian, and often enraged by news reports he read in *The Times*, and I remember an aunt complaining to me that he angrily ordered his guests to stand for the playing of the National anthem on the radio at the end of the day. That was an event which occurred during the early years of the Second World War.

My mother regretted the way my grandmother had treated her husband’s relatives whom she openly despised because of their Lancashire accents, and she refused on any occasion to visit her in-laws in the North, and discouraged their visits to the South. My mother, who did not get along with her father,

nonetheless wanted to keep up contact with that side of the family, and liked those whom she had met. “That side of the family had such beautiful sky blue eyes,” she once explained. There was one brother of my grandfather, Albert (1878-1975), who did visit the home of his successful sibling from time to time. This was an ex-soldier, a tall, shy, kindly bachelor of few words who often took me into the town to buy an ice cream.

My mother had even fonder memories of him a generation earlier, when he would thrust a guinea into her hand, and then rush away without a word until a subsequent visit a year or so later. My mother said he was “teased” or “bullied” by my grandfather when the latter asked why he did not buy himself a house. – “How can I?” replied Albert. “I don’t have any money.” – “How is it you haven’t any money when you have neither a family nor a wife?” My grandfather seemed to have no understanding of the socio-economic and class gap which had developed between the two brothers after a lifetime apart.

The opinion of my mother was that my grandmother was “uninterested” in men to an abnormal degree, and that she found her husband a nuisance around the house when he returned after three years abroad for three months leave before departing once again for another three years. But such was family Naval life at that time! Long absences had to be tolerated. Nonetheless, they did share many of the same opinions, and they did enjoy such social activities as attending public dances on a regular basis.

My mother was the youngest of three children, being born in 1906, and although she went to several private schools, she was poorly educated, and finished her school education at the age of 14. Although she acquired a fair amount of miscellaneous knowledge on music, literature, and the other arts after leaving school, and her conversation tended to be littered with French phrases, she adopted the commonly held prejudice of the uneducated that as soon as one had completed one’s formal education, then there was nothing more to be learned, and that all subsequent studies were either absurd or pretentious. She was never tired of ridiculing those – especially if they came from the lower middle classes – who were intent on “self-improvement,” and she was contemptuous of professors who supposedly were “egg-heads,” “forgetful,” “dull,” and usually lost for words when they found themselves in good company. Nonetheless, she was fond of reading – invariably modern novels on contemporary domestic life – and she maintained she could never remember a time when she was unable to read.

Her two elder sisters were more fortunate in their education. The eldest sister, Inez, born 1899, for whom I eventually became a favourite nephew, was sent off to a Belgian convent to complete her education and knowledge of French, the result of which was her conversion to lifelong atheism. The middle sister, Joan, born 1903, the most attractive of the three girls, was sent off to an expensive boarding school, at the cost of a benevolent distant relative, the result

of which was an overweening snobbery on everything to which snobbishness could be alluded.

As my mother was the "baby" of the family, she remained the favourite of her sisters, but the two elder girls soon developed a hatred for one another which was only ended through death. This hatred arose through a mixture of rivalry and jealousy. Inez was the plainest of the three girls, but probably the most intelligent, but she was soured by a jealous and unforgiving nature. She remained close to my grandmother in helping with domestic chores, and for a time, was almost a substitute mother to the younger siblings. The latter were far more attractive, and on at least one occasion my mother was elected a Carnival Queen, and all three girls were apparently highly-sexed despite their parents, apparently, being the reverse of that.

As my grandfather was stationed in different British ports, when he was not stationed abroad, my mother rarely lived for more than three years in any one place. She was born in Southsea, and at other times lived in Whitley Bay, where she saw the body of a little girl who had been drowned in the sea; and in Scotland, near Glasgow, for which she cherished the happiest memories of her childhood; and finally, just before my grandfather's retirement in 1919, in Littlehampton. As a result of this nomadic existence, she always said she felt at home anywhere in the world, and that she easily made friends, and indeed, she had few prejudices with regard to those she liked or disliked, providing they were only accessible to a friendly approach. She was rarely prepared to moralise as to how people should conduct their lives, providing only they were pleasant and preferably amusing.

My mother's first recollection of her father was as a 3-year old in Southsea. She had never seen him before, and he was returning from a 3-year stint in the Far East. After his carriage, with all his trunks, drew up at their house, following the short journey from his ship moored in Portsmouth harbour, my mother ran out to kiss her long absent parent, but instead of kissing her father, she threw her arms around the coachman, who was a much more impressive figure, to the amusement of my grandmother and her other daughters.

As became most people at that time, the adults of the family rarely betrayed feelings of extreme upset at personal loss, and my mother retained a passive and equable temperament throughout her life, taking lightly matters of disaster or death. This family characteristic became evident some days following the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912, when she attended a memorial service with her mother and siblings at a church in Eastleigh, Southampton, when she saw adults crying for the first time. "I only thought children cried," she explained. "I never thought adults were capable of such a thing." The church was packed with soldiers, and she remembered the strong smell of sweat from the assembled troops.

It was in Littlehampton, as a 16-year old where my mother’s personal relationship was finally broken with her father. One Autumn day when my grandfather was atop an apple tree in their garden, dropping the fruit into a garden sieve held by my mother standing below, she accidentally dropped the sieve, but my grandfather took it as an intentional act. Angered, he descended from the tree and struck her hard across the face, upon which she let up a loud wailing. My grandmother rushed into the garden, horrified, asking what all the noise was about, intent on calming the situation. My mother never forgave her father, and could seldom be brought to admit he had any good qualities. She often said her father had not done a stroke of work in his life, only ordered others to work for him. It was not until reaching old age that she regretted her attitude, when she kept a silver framed portrait of her father in full uniform in a prominent position in the living room.

Three years after this event occurred my grandfather was finally released from additional voluntary service in the Navy. According to my mother, he did not have the necessary personality to achieve higher rank, and hence there was no possibility for his extending his active career in the Navy, and so at this stage the family set about looking for a permanent home. He considered properties in Essex, Sussex, and Wiltshire, and finally settled on a fine grey stone built mansion constructed in 1837, on the outskirts of the small industrial town of Melksham, situated between Trowbridge and Chippenham, with the river Avon meandering through its centre. He gave the mansion the name of Sampford Place, since he had seen another property in Essex which greatly attracted him with the same name.

As soon as they had settled into their new home with its fine gardens and attractive meadows at the rear of the property, the four women of the household began to seek out a social life for themselves, whilst my grandfather involved himself with the local British Legion. Within a short while they began to entertain a nearby family who were seemingly “respectable,” but unknown to themselves, were not admitted as guests of the local gentry. Years later, my Aunt Inez spoke to me about this frightful *faux pas* of her parents – the greatest mistake of their lives – in rushing into a friendship in unknown social territory. This was a colossal disaster, for inadvertently, they had closed all doors to themselves to the people who really mattered in the neighbourhood.

My Aunt Inez soon concluded in her dismay there was no one worth socialising with in the town with its petty tradesmen and dirty manufacturing industry. She was not going to stay in such a place. She had little time to lose – she was already 27 and well beyond the usual marriageable age. Accordingly, she went off to London where she found work, and could live a free life of gaiety and fun. My Aunt Joan, meanwhile, was more fortunate. In the same year the family settled in their new home, she met and married a chemist, Reginald Lawton, working at the huge dairy in Melksham, and both her sisters were bridesmaids at the wedding.

Not long afterwards my mother joined her eldest sister in London, where they lived together in a large lodging house in the West End. Inez took over the responsibility of chaperoning her 19-year old sister, and keeping her out of harm's way, and warning her about all the evil entrapments to be found in the capital. Decades later my mother described with humour the weird and eccentric characters who tenanted this lodging house, which included two middle-aged "pansies," and she impersonated their voice and gestures, as one said to the other after the evening meal, "You wash up and I'll dry," which brought laughter to those who listened to the episode.

As my mother had no formal qualifications she worked as a receptionist and then as a nanny, at one time working for the well-known historian, H.A.L. Fisher and brother of the future Archbishop of Canterbury, and finally she returned to work as a receptionist in Harley Street, at which time she met my father.

*

My father studied both medicine and dental surgery at Guys Hospital, and qualified at the start of the 1930s, and so he had a string of 24 letters behind his name. He had previously been at Highgate School where he played hockey and fives and later tennis and golf – or so it is recorded by those who noted seriously the facts of his life. He was also a member of the School cadets. He had had the most protective upbringing which any child could possibly have endured, and until the day of his marriage had hardly spent a night away from the family home. Shortly after he matriculated from school, my grandfather took him on a short trip to Belgium. This supposedly comprised his great "education for life," and although this country was still referred to as "plucky little Belgium," on account of her resistance to Germany in 1914, my grandfather could nonetheless whisper into his son's ear about the undesirable characteristics of foreigners and their unpleasant habits.

My grandmother was deeply religious, and a member of the Mothers' Union, and churchgoing was regular and taken seriously. Whilst my grandfather had a more relaxed attitude towards religion and sexual morality – he had a number of affairs in his time – he was a conscientious sidesman, and conventional in his theological thinking but without being emotionally committed over doctrinal niceties. The church which the family attended was St. James's in Muswell Hill, and it stands on the highest point of anywhere in London apart from Hampstead and Highgate Village. The family were naturally Anglicans, but my grandmother hung onto this ideal as the defining limit between good and evil.

Although Non-Conformists were barely tolerable – and in Muswell Hill there were churches of every denomination – she had a loathing for Catholics amounting to hatred. They were untrustworthy and liable to treasonable acts, and it was scandalous they were allowed to sit as members of Parliament. What had brought her to think along such lines? Her mind must have been stirred by

the school history books of long ago: of Bloody Mary and the burning of the Protestant martyrs; of Phillip II and the Armada sent against England; of Guy Fawkes and the gunpowder plot; of Louis XIV and the threat of a French invasion; of James II and the Glorious Revolution; of Jacobite conspiracies to reverse the Hanoverian succession; and of Lord George Gordon, and the anti-Catholic riots of 1788.

Or it may have been due to the inherited cultural factor of her ancestors having emigrated from Northern Ireland to England early in the 18th century. The family were related to John Thomas Smith, keeper of the prints at the British Museum, and at one time a partner of the sculptor Nollekins, of whom he wrote what is reputedly the most savage biography in the English language, i.e., *Nollekins and his Times* (1828), in retaliation at being excluded as a beneficiary of his will. John Thomas Smith was the son of Nathaniel Smith, two portraits of which (dated 1745) presently hang in my living room. It is just conceivable that such religious prejudices were passed down from generation to generation without any consciousness of maintaining a tradition of ill-intent.

I remember my cousin, Michael, not so many years ago, recollecting how our grandmother would stand behind the living room window on Sunday evenings, glaring across the street in deep disdain, as crowds of Catholics moved along the opposite pavement to mass at the modern church just fifty yards or so down the hill. To her they were evil spirits, owing a greater loyalty to the Pope than the King, and therefore were undeserving of citizenship. Who could have imagined that her youngest and favourite son would eventually – long after her death – marry a Catholic, and that his children would be brought up in that faith?

Although my father had more common sense than to share the rigidly religious views of his mother, he remained strictly conventional on religious questions, whilst being rigid in his approach to most other matters in life. He had little experience of life beyond the conventions of home and school, little imagination, and accepted platitudes and what people said at face value. He was incorruptibly honest in matters of give and take, almost incapable of guile under any circumstances, and consequently blunt and abrasive in his relationships, since he could hardly conceal his feelings which were liable to burst out and cause offence on the most inopportune occasions. My mother once said he had become the joke of the neighbourhood on account of his habit of paying every bill as soon as it dropped through the letter box.

Although he appreciated humour if it was served up on a plate, by a comedian on the radio or the theatre, or through literature such as *Pickwick Papers*, and although he was not above repeating jokes he had heard at Rotary or his Masonic lodge, he was not a humorous man. If he attempted humour, it was usually cruel and at the expense of others – and of course we were obliged to laugh. If he found himself in merry company, such as the family get-togethers at Christmas, which our family often hosted, his merriment was

forced and joyless – little more than pretence in imitating those around him. He was too unimaginative to be witty or artistic, or to appreciate the arts in a proper sense, although he did reveal a remarkable knowledge of literature from time to time.

He could – and did recite entire paragraphs from the novels of Dickens and Lord Lytton, usually those at the beginning or end of their books. It always struck me that this was a strange way to teach an appreciation of literature. He had a huge appreciation for Sir Henry Irving and theatrical productions he had seen in childhood, saying that modern actors weren't a patch on the grandiloquent performances of their predecessors. But such opinions may have been more attributable to hearsay than actual experience, bearing in mind that Irving died in 1905, one year before my father's birth.

My mother described him as "nervy," and certainly he was full of fears, and warnings against doing this or that, and he was opposed to adventure or risks of most kinds – except that of the stock exchange which inflicted havoc on his nervous system, for the downturns of the market would frequently put him into the worst of moods. He was also subject to dark moods of depression, often when we were away on holiday, when he would take to his bed feigning illness for days on end, whilst the rest of us played on the beach. He was quite unlike his other siblings, and quite unlike his father, although he may have inherited his depression from my grandmother.

My grandfather had a great sense of humour and loved to relate amusing stories about friends and acquaintances, which although they were at the expense of others, were not marked by the cruelty of those told by my father. He also had a ready wit (whilst my father had none) and would often pick up something I had said and give it a humorous twist. The difference between the two men was that the elder had experienced the wider world, whilst the younger remained the voluntary prisoner of his parents for far too long.

There is one exception in regard to any insensitivity in the above description of my father's character: as a medical student at Guy's he had been sent with others to the East End slums to attend the appalling condition of the poor, and he once described how these were people only dressed in rags, where the children were barefoot, hungry, and horribly diseased. He came out with this story late in life in the 1970s, and it was addressed to a German friend rather than to me, for I had never heard him relate such stories before. The significance to be found in the experience (if not so much in the story itself), I believe, may attribute to his life-long terror of poverty as a social issue, his fear and withering contempt for the downtrodden because of their hopelessness and the ever-present possibility of their revolt. It may account for his right wing views as a defensive response to the prospect of society being overwhelmed and barbarised by a revolutionary proletariat. This, of course, was the age when the privileged intelligentsia in our universities were secretly turning to the cause of Communism, but the existence of widespread poverty and unemployment may

just as well have aroused the kind of reactionary conservatism on which my father depended psychologically for the greater part of his life.

As to my father's experience with women before he met my mother, I can only surmise from his occasional outbursts during my teenage years in response to my disappointments in love. He was contemptuous of my even wanting to think about girls, let alone wanting to *associate* with them. He once angrily exclaimed, "You should have nothing to do with women until you're earning £500 a year, and got £500 in the bank. They're just an unnecessary expense." In his eyes, a successful relationship with a woman had nothing to do with experience, or developing the arts of courtship. It was biological and financial, but psychology had nothing to do with it. He could appreciate biology because he was a medical man, but psychology was something suspect and dirty – insolently usurping the role of religion – being the cranky invention of a group of maverick Germans who had illicitly broken away from the proper constraints of the medical profession.

Such views may sound outrageous in the 21st century but they were still common amongst the older generations in the 1950s. In my father's view, a long-term friendship or sexual relationship between a man and a woman was no more complex than that of the amoeba. Therefore, he concluded, if I had any difficulties with a woman, if she was moody or argumentative, I should do what he did, and tell her to "go to hell." If you took any truck from a woman, or gave into her feelings, you were letting yourself into all kinds of trouble. Such was the attitude of my father at the time he met my mother. Such a man could only hope for success with the opposite sex through over-awing or blinding them with the grandeur of his professional qualifications, and the promise of a secure life free from financial anxiety.

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My mother, meanwhile, had probably had a little more experience of the opposite sex than her future husband by the time they met. For a period she was strongly attached to James de la Mare, a nephew of the writer, Walter de la Mare, and he reciprocated her feelings. He was a man of great charm and personality, whom I met on several formal family occasions, and maintained a life-long employment with a large insurance company. She then had a more serious relationship with a brother of her elder sister's husband, but when he proposed marriage it was on the condition they would go to New Zealand where she would live the life of a farmer's wife. She declined the offer. Her suitor went to New Zealand alone, failed in business, returned a few years later, and eventually died of a heart attack in his 60s. On another occasion she was friendly with a German called, Hess, explaining, "I would clearly have landed myself in the soup if I had married him and found myself in Germany when the War broke out."

She seems otherwise to have had an active social life. When she was in her late 80s she confessed to me that her first sexual experience was on the

occasion she was raped by a man she hardly knew behind some bathing huts in Henley-on-Thames, after bathing in the river with a party of friends. Had my father ever known this, bearing in mind his high moral principles, it is doubtful he would ever have married her.

It may therefore be assumed that both my parents, at the time that they met, were therefore naïve with regard to any and every aspect of personal relationships. Their very naivety may have driven them together, for they must have regarded one another as metaphors for ideal qualities rather than as the reality of the personalities they were. My father was obviously a "good catch," and plenty could be said about his "admirable" characteristics to all and sundry. My mother was clearly the "ideal woman," since she was meek, pliable, passive, and obedient, and most significantly, was free of that worst fault to be found in a woman of having the kind of "intelligence" which most irritated a man. Their love affair, if it can be called that, seems to have been rapid, since they were soon engaged and wedding bells were not far off.

However, a serious impediment was soon uncovered and had to be attended to without further ado. Whilst my grandmother was in conversation with her future daughter-in-law, carefully searching out for any secrets she may have hidden away, she discovered to her horror that my mother had never been confirmed. My mother's parents were both non-believers: my grandfather being too much of an intellectual to bother with religion, whilst my grandmother had a very low opinion of the clergy and their hypocrisy, although both occasionally attended church for festive events, and they were always happy to entertain the local pastor for afternoon tea.

The consequence of this discovery was that my mother had to undergo the humiliation of attending religious lessons amongst a party of young people in preparation for her formal reception into the Anglican Church. She was put under the guidance of the Rev. Prebendary E.A. Dunn (1877-1964), of St. James's church, and a good friend of my grandmother. This clergyman, whom I came to know and dislike some years later, for reasons which will become evident later in this memoir, was a large rotund man with a diminutive wife. My mother used to say during the War years that he took all his wife's rations and left her with sparrow feed. He was a well-known churchman in North London, a friend of Dr. Fisher, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and never left his parish in Muswell Hill, since God had appeared to him in a dream telling him not to do so, and this was taken by his respectful congregation as an act of providence. He became most notable for proselytising amongst the large Jewish community in North London and converting them to Christianity.

My mother retained an intense dislike for the Rev. E.A. Dunn because his excess religiosity deprived him of the human touch, and he was remote and unsociable in not bothering to visit his most loyal parishioners. An example of his dogmatic approach was reflected in what my father repeated one day on returning from Evensong, when the Rev. Dunn announced a forthcoming

performance of Handel's *Messiah* in the church, adding, "You will not be coming to bathe yourselves in a musical concert, you will be coming to undergo a religious experience." – "Now that would put me off from the start," exclaimed my mother, and that was the reply my father anticipated. All great art, of course, is created on its own terms, and it is certainly not the role of others to *dictate* how it should be appreciated, and even less to identify a divide between artistic technique and the emotional response of the free individual.

At last my parents were married in November 1934, with drums beating and trumpets blowing. In the provincial West country paper, the news report was headed, WILTS SOCIETY WEDDING, and the following formed part of the accompanying text: "The bride wore her bridegroom's present, a pair of diamond earrings, at the wedding of Mr. Felix Norman Corfe, M.R.C.S.. L.R.C.P.,L.D.S.Eng., Muswell Hill, London, eldest son of Mr. Ernest and Mrs. Corfe, Muswell Hill, with Miss Joyce Dulcie Prudence, youngest daughter of Engineer Captain J.W. Figgins, O.B.E., RN, and Mrs. Figgins, of Sampford Place, Melksham, at St. Michael's Church, Melksham, on Saturday. The bride was attired in cream taffeta, and wore her mother's wedding veil. She carried a bouquet of pink roses. She was attended by four bridesmaids, &c. … Canon Sangster (Vicar) officiated, and the service was choral. Mr. Arlett was at the organ, and the hymns were, 'Lead us, Heavenly Father,' 'O perfect love,' and, 'The Voice that breathed o'er Eden.'" The report was accompanied by full-sized pictures of my grandfather escorting his daughter along the path to the church entrance, and of the bridal party on the steps of Sampford Place.

The following is part of the report taken from another Wiltshire paper: "The large attendance at the church was testimony to the popularity of the bride and her parents, Capt. Figgins being particularly well-known amongst ex-Service men, being a Vice-President of the local Branch of the British Legion. … as the happy couple left the church to the music of the 'Wedding march' they were showered with confetti and good wishes from their friends who had assembled outside. A reception was held at Sampford Place, the home of the bride's parents, at which there was a large gathering, and later Mr. and Mrs. Corfe left for London, thence to Paris by air liner for their honeymoon, the bride wearing a rust colour suit, brown hat and shoes."

Meanwhile, the local London paper, *The Hornsey Journal*, also reported the wedding at length, the following being an extract from their report: "Mr. Norman Corfe is well known in Muswell Hill, where he has lived all his life. He was educated at Highgate School. He is an active member of the Old Cholmeleions" (his old school association) "and also a member of the Coldfall Tennis Club. Both he and his father are sidesmen at St. James's church."

I am proud to claim my conception occurred in Paris, the world's artistic capital, and hope that in some mysterious way, the rational spirit of France penetrated my parents through impressions and possibly diet, to have been transferred through a combination of genetic and psychological factors (as yet

to be scientifically uncovered) to influence my development and future existence. In any event, despite biological inheritance (which became sufficiently evident), I was to develop a personality and traits and aspirations quite different from either of my parents, as will be shown in this memoir. I was not to be influenced by my parents – or so I always liked to think – in any matters of opinion or value, but rather to form my own personality from within through the objectivity of my own reason and common sense. If this was impossible from a psychological aspect, then I certainly became a thoughtful child from an early age, and soon learned to accept few things at their face value.

As I said at the start of this memoir, my parents' families were very different. Whilst on my mother's side they were relaxed with an easy-going charm, as became those with a service background, on my father's side (both the Corfes and the Smiths), tended to be tense, formal, and rigid in their attitudes, as was proper with business people, and if there was little charm, this was replaced with reticence or reserve. It was not long before my maternal grandmother took an intense dislike to her son-in-law on account of his charmless manner and rigid attitude to personal relationships.

An example of this occurred during the early War years when my father dropped a tooth paste glass in the bathroom at Sampford Place. He made a great fuss, apologising for what he had done, and insisted on replacing the glass with an exact copy which he did. I remember my grandmother complaining about this to her daughter in carrying his acknowledgement of regret too far. She felt offended. A guest and close relative should feel at ease in the house, and should not feel the obligation to replace the broken object. My father saw the situation quite differently. He had destroyed an article of value – for all property was sacrosanct – and he felt in honour bound to make up for the loss in no uncertain terms.

Another example of the difference between the two families occurred when I was a teenager, staying with my grandmother and Aunt Inez in Bath. We were in a hurry to get off early one morning, and when my aunt urged me to clean my teeth, I replied, "I don't need to brush my teeth, I've just eaten an apple, and so I can save on the toothpaste." – "Now isn't that a typical Corfe attitude,!" exclaimed my aunt in astonishment to my grandmother. "They have all the money in the world and they still want to save." The Corfes had a notorious reputation for meanness, and hated any kind of expenditure when it could be avoided.

The first serious break in relationships occurred with my birth – which was the cause of the rumpus which followed. My Aunt Inez married in the same year as my parents, being already 35 years of age and desperate to have children. Her husband, a huge man with a domineering appearance and high self-regard was more than 20 years her senior, a qualified architect named Sydie (Bill) Dakers. He was another of those men whom my mother said had "never

done a stroke of work in his life," and indeed, the couple remained in straightened financial circumstances until my grandmother bailed them out many years later.

Sydie, or Uncle Bill, was a man who took no nonsense from anybody, and quarrelled with all and sundry. My mother explained that although he was highly talented and artistic, his irascibility kept him out of work, since no one was prepared to put up with his bad temper and arrogance. During his long bachelorhood, he lived in expensive West End lodgings (at one time in the Albany alongside the Royal Academy in Piccadilly), belonged to several of the best London clubs, and spent profusely. He did have charm, was well-read and knowledgeable, was a great conversationalist, and caroused with his drinking friends over whom he dominated as a leading light.

When he met my aunt, she was bowled over by him as a man before whom all other men shrank into insignificance by comparison. As a strong personality with a superior intelligence there was nothing of which he was incapable. As a teenager I was terrified of him, although he always treated me with good humour, and my grandmother insisted I address him as "Sir," which I respectfully did. During the War years he worked as a lecturer at Bristol University, and on one occasion he proudly showed me a cartoon of himself together with a group of other men which had been published in *Punch*.

When they married, it was a quiet civil wedding, as neither wanted to be involved with the church. Since the two married sisters were living in London, it was natural that my parents and Inez and Sydie should meet and socialise together from time to time, but my father soon fell out of favour with the older man. The bone of contention was Ludo. My father won time after time. "He didn't like to lose at Ludo," chuckled my father with understatement many years later. Sydie could never bear to lose at anything – and certainly not to a pipsqueak a generation younger than himself. At first he would move around uneasily on his chair with a darkened brow, but on losing the third round, he would burst out in a temper. My father may not have been entirely blameless, for he was apt to express triumphalism in any kind of competitive situation, although winning at Ludo could hardly be compared with scoring a goal at a cup final. Sydie may well have had some justification for his irritation. "He was always jealous of the younger generation," explained my mother.

Ludo was not really a serious issue and I am sure that Inez was able to alleviate her husband's upset on such occasions, but something far more serious was about to occur. The child for which she desperately hoped was not going to materialise. It soon became apparent she was barren. "She would have been a wonderful mother," reiterated mine on several occasions, "although I'm not quite sure he would have made such a good father." Having come to terms with childlessness, Inez transferred all her interest and affection on the forthcoming child of her youngest sister, with gifts of clothing, etc., for the expected baby, and in the hope of being chosen as a godmother. She seems to have forgotten,

however, that a “godmother” has a religious dimension, and that my father would never have allowed a professed atheist to stand in for any of his children. Anyhow that issue did not arise. Shortly before my mother was due to go into the Nursing home in central London for delivery – and she would be away for the average period of ten days – it was arranged that Inez would stay with my father as housekeeper in supervising the maid, and for finalising arrangements for the return of mother and child.

During my mother’s absence an almighty row broke out between Aunt Inez and my father which led to a total break in their relationship. Consequently, my father was not to be on speaking terms with his sister-in-law for a period of some 12 years. My mother never discovered the real cause of the quarrel until her dying day, except that I was the subject around which it circulated, as both my father and Aunt Inez resolutely refused to discuss the matter. My analysis of the situation is that it was most likely that my father in his insensitivity, and assumed superiority, had inadvertently said something deeply offensive to his sister-in-law. Perhaps the question of a “godmother” had arisen, and my father, in his candid innocent manner, had mounted his high moral horse. Whatever had occurred must have been shameful and shocking in calling for concealment, as otherwise, either or both parties would eventually have come forward with some kind of explanation.

CHAPTER 2
As a Toddler in London

“Our days, our deeds, all we achieve or are,
Lay folded in our infancy; the things
Of good or ill we choose while yet unborn.”

J.T. Trowbridge, *Sonnet: Nativity*

The problem of my name – My cousins – My admiration for their family – My godparents – How my mother ingratiated herself with her in-laws – The unfortunate consequences of this to other relatives – My loathing for Muswell Hill – Haunted by irrational fears – My first love

Not long after my birth, my christening was held at St. James’s Church, and I was named Robert Nigel, but only known by the latter. Robert was the choice of my maternal grandfather after a Scottish relative. In my later teenage years I came to loathe the name of Nigel, and from the time I entered the Army, I insisted on being known as Robert.

Nigel struck me as a name which was effete or effeminate, failing to reflect manliness, or aspirations towards the kind of heroism I admired. What great man had ever been known as Nigel? Sir Walter Scott had written a relatively minor novel, *The Fortunes of Nigel*, about the ruffianly and seamier side of London life during the reign of James I, but what inspiration was that? There was no other noteworthy person in either fact or fiction with the name of Nigel with whom I wished to be associated. During my late pre-pubescent romantic phase, I could not imagine anyone with the name of Nigel swinging a two-edged sword in Knightly combat. Robert was little better, but there was Robert the Bruce or Robert the Devil of Normandy – and then there were many Roberts who had flourished in the arts and literature.

I was, however, happy to be born in the month of August – the month which is named after one of the greatest men who lived: the Emperor Augustus, the man who established an era which was eventually to lead to the longest period of world peace in recorded history. I was also born on the anniversary of the day and the month coinciding with the Emperor's death in AD 14. It was during a period when the arts, literature, and historical scholarship, reached a height of genius which few ages have equalled. Since my teenage years I have regarded this Roman Emperor as a kind of personal deity or guardian angel, whose ideals and qualities most closely matched my hopes for a just and stable world. Perhaps it is no coincidence that August is a warm and sunny month, and since it was the month I entered the world, it remains a constant reminder of the man who sought through practical political means to establish the foundations for eternal peace and prosperity for all peoples irrespective of race, nationality, religion, or the level of their cultural development. The apotheosis he achieved after his demise was never more sell-deserved.

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My godparents, naturally, were chosen with care. There was my paternal grandfather, who was a safe bet because of his religious principles, and then there was my Uncle Dick, being the husband of my father's sister, Joan. Dick Brown was a tall good-looking businessman, a man of immense charm, witty, good with children, always in control in a social situation, but at the same time self-effacing and ready to admit his faults, and because of this mixture of characteristics, he was universally popular. "No one ever disliked Uncle Dick," said my mother on one occasion. As an entrepreneur, however, he was capable of introducing guile into his charm in driving home a bargain, and on at least one occasion he fell out with my father because of this, and there were other petty matters which occasionally divided the two families.

Joan, my father's sister was the sisterly-love of his life, and as the only daughter of the family, she was joyful and carefree. As Aunt Joan described the situation to me, my father was her "guardian angel," a grimly visaged jealous teenager whenever a boy friend visited the parental home. When such visits occurred, he would sit at the top of the stairs with his chin in his hands,

watching or listening to ensure that nothing untoward would occur. Joan responded to this concern with a mixture of amusement and appreciation. Dick and Joan had three children, all of them with great charm and fully endowed with the social graces: Anne, three years older than me, Michael, six months my senior, a great comedian and wit with whom I became very close, and Howard, who used his charm rather than abilities in successfully forwarding his career. The youngest was the same age as my brother, Gavin, and so we four boys and cousins frequently met and played together.

The Browns were great entertainers and not afraid of lavish expenditure. As a family they were in direct contrast to the family of Felix Corfe, which was dull, socially awkward, and on edge with the world since it gave rise to every conceivable fear. In addition the Felix Corfe family was mean-spirited, self-centred, and careful with every penny spent. Nonetheless, the two families met and socialised often, since my Aunt Joan was probably the woman my father loved more than any in his life. It can be no surprise, therefore, that because of the relaxed style of this other family I always envied the Browns, since they seemed so much better than us in so many ways. They were always joyful and happy, and there was always laughter in their house – and most significant of all, there was a spirit of easy-going leisure.

Many decades later my wife was to say that with Michael it was always "two laughs a minute," but our friendship was to be broken for several decades at the start of my 20s – at a period not covered in this memoir. Our closeness was due to our blood relationship rather than the similarity of our temperaments, and tensions inevitably developed between us, the eventual occurrence of which may be anticipated by reading between the lines of those pages towards the close of this book. However, it was due to the tactlessness and careless tongue of my mother that finally brought about the breaking point of our friendship, the consequence of which resulted in the humiliation of being excluded from invitations to formal functions of the family. On expressing my resentment at this treatment to my parents, my father angrily retorted, "the Browns are living above their station and beyond their means. They're a bad example. You should have nothing to do with them." At this response I felt doubly humiliated, since the Browns possessed every quality I wished for, and I was certainly not prepared to accept my father's criticism of their values.

Decades later, long after I had been reconciled with Michael, he admitted he had always been "terrified" of my father. This surprised me for I thought that uninhibited freedom-loving Michael had never been afraid of anybody. This fear may have arisen through the fact that my father never had any compunction about hitting other peoples' children in their own homes if they were "rude," which he thought was not only a right but a duty of responsible adults in correcting "naughty" children. The last occasion on which this occurred (to my knowledge) was in the 1980s whilst my parents were on holiday in Australia, when he struck his grandson, Barnaby, the son of my youngest brother, Oliver.

On hearing a distressed crying, my Australian sister-in-law, Julie, the most equable and inoffensive woman, ran angrily into the room, exclaiming to my father, “Did you hit him?” My mother, who was present at the scene and related the story, had the presence of mind to interject with the words, “No, the poor little thing tripped over on the carpet.” As the child was a two-year old toddler who had not yet learned to speak, the incident was never revealed and it remained a secret. In expressing her horror over the episode my mother concluded, “I don’t know what would have happened if Julie and Oliver had learned the truth.”

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My godmothers were Joan Lawton, my mother’s elder sister, who was to take little interest in my existence and to dislike me from an early age; and my Aunt Betty, who was the granddaughter of a famous French chef, M. Menager, whom Edward VII had brought over to England, and appointed as Head Chef at Sandringham. This was a king who enjoyed his food and had a prodigious appetite. Betty was the daughter of Lewis Bedbrook (1877-1962), known as Loots, a favourite brother of my maternal grandmother (whom the latter described as a lively and merry socialite who never aged in his temperament or interests until his dying day in advanced old age) and his French wife, Louise, known as Lou. The latter, and her sister, Marie, were educated and brought up amongst Ladies in Waiting, and other titled people in Court circles, and Lou who died in April 1944, was my mother’s favourite aunt. Aunt Betty was a conscientious and generous godmother who always gave worthwhile and valuable presents. Being of French descent, it was not unnatural that she veered towards Anglo-Catholicism, as too did her elder daughter, Maris (three years my senior), and I would not be surprised if both were secretly Roman Catholics.

She also had strong Jacobite leanings, and these were revealed on one occasion after my mother had taken me to see a film about Bonnie Prince Charlie and the uprising of 1745, when she expressed her regret that the Hanoverian, George II, had not been overthrown and the Stuarts restored to the throne, and being insufficiently educated at the time, I was won over to her romantic views. Betty was a close and life-long friend of my mother, until they both died in their 90s, but my mother said her cousin was of a nervous temperament and suffered hypochondria, and when they both worked and lived in London, Betty insisted on travelling with my mother on the tube, since she was afraid to be alone on the underground.

She was married to Vaughan Venables, who was known to the broader Bedbrook family some years before their marriage. As a young man Vaughan had his own car, and after private dances organised by different members of the family, the young ladies hated being paired off by the older generation to be taken home by the future husband of my aunt. This was because Vaughan insisted on fondling any girl he was paired with, and would then go beyond the bounds of propriety until his partner either agreed to satisfy him or else repelled

his advances. Of course none of these girls could report back to the older generation, and neither could they refuse to be partnered with the "charming young gentleman" whom their betters put in their charge. I was only to learn this from my mother when in her 80s, after the death of my father, when she revealed a number of untoward stories which would have been forbidden information at an earlier period. As I note later in this memoir, Uncle Vaughan was subsequently to become a war hero in the infantry when he was awarded an MC and attained the rank of major.

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My mother was always fond of gossip, and there is nothing which more successfully helps to cement new friendships than the communication of gossip – especially if it is malicious or may be given a malicious interpretation. My mother's first introduction to her in-laws had not been entirely propitious, for reasons outlined in the previous chapter, but some months after my birth, an exceptional opportunity arose whereby she might ingratiate herself with my grandmother and thereby be received with greater warmth into the bosom of the Corfe family. The story she was to uncover was to prove a major social disaster for a brother-in-law, and to lead to the severance of a relationship which was never to be renewed. I am not suggesting that my mother set out to be malicious, but only that she wished to further her interests with her in-laws, and that she was either too naïve to anticipate the consequences of her action, or chose to ignore them, or lacked the moral sense to refrain from repeating what could only be harmful to those it concerned.

Shortly after my parents married, my father's younger brother, Maurice, a podgy, good-natured happy-go-lucky man, married his sweetheart, June, who supposedly had a shady past – which none dared to speak of. Maurice was a man who had tried his hand at various occupations – none of them with particular success – including a year in Bremen, where he had learned German, working in a shipping office. At the time he was courting June my father was accompanying his brother in clubs and dance halls. Many years later, my father explained, "he was warned by several men not to associate with 'that girl,' but he took no notice." June was a blonde beauty, witty, charming, generous, and with artistic talents in both singing and painting. Although she spoke with a high-class accent, it was said it was not her proper voice. She either originated from the East End or the Essex Thames side – no one knew exactly about her origins or her family.

On being introduced to the family there were inconsistencies in what she said. Not only was she concealing facts, but she was apparently a consummate liar, but such conclusions could not be admitted to the person concerned for lack of proof. My grandparents were unhappy about the situation but could do nothing about it, and finally, as the couple were determined to tie the knot, they were married. In no time she was pregnant – or so it seemed. As the months passed by, and she became larger and larger, it was apparent she was

encountering a particularly difficult pregnancy, for she suffered acute pains, ensuring the sympathy of her in-laws and all those around her.

At last she went into a nursing home and was delivered with a beautiful baby girl named Alvis. Accordingly, friends and relatives arrived with flowers and presents, and congratulations on the happy birth. My mother arrived one day alone at the nursing home for the same purpose, and on departing from her sister-in-law, she got into conversation with one of the nurses – which was typical of her indiscriminate sociability in talking to all and sundry at the drop of a hat, even if it touched on matters which were none of her business. She was astonished to uncover the fact that the baby had not been born in the nursing home and that the mother had never been through a pregnancy.

This was a piece of scandal which was too tempting to suppress, and of course the first person to know was my father. Being the honest person that he was in never concealing the truth, he insisted that this needed to be communicated to his parents without delay. My mother described in detail exactly what had occurred in the nursing home. My grandparents were appalled by this unforgivable deceit, especially in view of all the forethought and ingenuity which had been involved. Consequently, both mother and adopted child were forbidden entry to my grandparents' home, and this also meant exclusion from contact with any extended members of the family. During the War my Uncle Maurice was an occasional visitor to his parents' home, where he appeared in his RAF officer's uniform and a generous moustache as became the flying service, and although he was always alone, he remained his cheerful and good-natured self.

I met June and Alvis for the first time several years after the War, following the death of my grandmother from the King's palsy and a stroke. She died quietly one winter's afternoon whilst sitting by the coal fire in the living room. As my grandfather had a more easy-going and forgiving nature, his daughter-in-law and granddaughter were accepted back into the family circle, and as if to make up for lost time, Maurice and June proved very hospitable, and our family were frequently invited to the various homes they occupied, mostly in Essex, in the post-War period. In later years it surprised me that June never seemed to hold it against my mother for all the upset she had caused the family, but I have since found that those who are little less than honest are often least liable to nurture resentment after an injury has been incurred. In mending matters of the past, and sealing future friendships, the couple probably took the wisest course for their own eventual happiness.

When we grandchildren, that is, the Browns and my younger brother and I were first introduced to Alvis, which occurred at my cousins' home in Totteridge, it felt as if we were meeting a complete stranger. We children were polite, almost deferential, in pulling out different toys from a cupboard to arouse the interest of this long lost cousin, but she seemed distant and quite different from the rest of us. It soon became apparent she existed on a different

level from the rest of us, and she was never wholly accepted into the family. I remember her on one occasion disdainfully dismissing the antics of a favourite great uncle, Quentin, when he took us children on a walk around Totteridge. He had been a surveyor and house agent, and remarked on the architecture of the different houses we passed. Alvis thought him a "show off" and "just weird," and when she concluded expressing her disgust, we other children remained silent, for he had always been a respected and much-loved uncle.

On one occasion, on the increasingly rare occurrences when Alvis found herself at larger family gatherings, in her late teenage years, she found herself in the company of Aunt Inez, shortly after the latter had been reconciled with my father. Inez expressed her shock to my parents, saying, "How can a girl like that be so common when she's been brought up in such a good family?" – "Well, we know nothing about her biological past," answered my mother. – "That's right, that's what we call Reversion to Type," said Inez as if suddenly enlightened, seizing on a psychological term she had heard but never properly understood.

The years passed and Alvis married and had two daughters of her own, and they studied ballet and enjoyed the other pursuits of young girls. Whilst Alvis worked in a cigarette factory, her husband ran his own business in recycling pallets. By that time both her parents were dead, and her family were only encountered on grand formal functions when an invitation was felt to be obligatory. I remember on one occasion Alvis boasting about the money she earned in the cigarette factory, which exceeded my earnings as a senior manager, and how successful and prosperous her husband had become in recycling pallets. There was nothing much the rest of us could say in response to these opening conversational gambits, except to nod and remain silent. It was not good form to talk about money in that way and so there was little more to be said. Alvis, and her husband of few words, and their pretty well-dressed daughters, remained social outsiders despite their desperate efforts to ingratiate themselves with the family.

Eventually, on one such celebratory occasion, Alvis was grossly insulted by Aunt Joan, and the family walked out never to be seen or heard of again. Aunt Joan felt she had nothing to lose, since her brother, Maurice, was already dead, and possibly, she was achieving a kind of late revenge for all the upset to her parents which had occurred decades earlier in the mid-1930s. Her youngest son, Howard, who had witnessed the incident, was deeply shaken, exclaiming, "It should never have happened!" Whatever we may have thought in the depths of our heart, we children of the younger generation were always polite and kind towards Alvis and her family, and had no axe to grind with regard to past resentments.

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Before describing my earliest recollections and impressions, I must first describe the neighbourhood and then the house in which I spent my early years.

Muswell Hill was a place I loathed throughout my childhood for what I took to be its ugliness and petty bourgeois values. Whilst on the one hand it became the butt of comedians and social observers for its ultra-respectability, on the other hand, it became the chosen home of public notabilities – especially those in the acting profession, or on radio or TV. It was, therefore, a high status North London suburb, although nothing to compare with Highgate Village or Hampstead – two places for which I formed a deep affection. If one attended the pantomime at the Finsbury Park Hippodrome, for example, the leading comics would usually refer to the "snobs of Muswell Hill," and be assured of laughter and applause. Meanwhile, Arthur Daly, the notorious spiv played by George Cole in the comic TV series, *Minder*, occasionally referred with pride to a "very respectable uncle" who lived in Muswell Hill. The author's critical impressions of the district were therefore already within the public sphere without the need for his having to record his own feelings of the area.

I loathed the pretentiousness of the red brick Edwardian architecture, the wooden decoration over the front porches, and the hideous stained glass set into the leaded front doors. Everything Edwardian was heavy and ugly, and internal furnishings were invariably dark-stained oak. I also hated the place because of its suburban milieu: the identical – or almost identical rows of houses behind their privet or laurel hedges and petty front gardens in quiet streets where nothing of consequence appeared to happen. I concluded, wrongly, that anyone prepared to live in such a place must necessarily be dull and inconsequential – people who had never had a past, and certainly would never have a future. This was a place where nothing changed as one decade followed another.

The most famous building in Muswell Hill was Alexandra Palace, which looked like a ruin before it was built, and was certainly a white elephant before its completion. This nondescript, purposeless, dirty galt brick structure, standing atop a hill in lonesome isolation, looked threatening against the horizon, with its frightening television masts rising from a tower, and the entire pile seemed to be a metaphor for the soullessness and vacuity of Muswell Hill. A cold wind constantly brushed past the building, and only bored hooligans and vandals frequented its surroundings, occasionally breaking a window or spraying graffiti onto the walls.

Until the start of the 21st century that was the picture I held of Muswell Hill and its inhabitants. Early in the present century I was invited to a party in the district, and had to admit the spaciousness of the rooms, the generous open spaces of the hallways, and the solidity of the structures. These were houses which were clearly superior – even aesthetically – to those constructed in the 20s or 30s, and infinitely superior to those which followed later in the century. Before attending the party, I walked along the well-known shopping streets, and was pleased by the quality and variety of the independent retail outlets, and I even discovered a shop stocked with interesting antique Chinese furniture, where I met and talked with a friendly Chinese assistant. Perhaps Muswell Hill

was not such a bad place after all. Perhaps it was the associations of unhappy experiences and physical suffering which made me disdain and loathe the place so intensely.

Nonetheless, Muswell Hill had become a very different place since I lived there in the 1930s-40s. The population had trebled since most of the one-family residences had been divided into three flats for three families. Every inch of kerbside was taken up with parked vehicles, since the houses were built before the age of popular car ownership, and so garages were never considered. Buses were the main form of transport to the City or West End, or to Highgate for the underground on the Northern line, although when I first went to work, I took the steam train from Cranley Gardens station, just five minutes from the house, to Finsbury Park and King's Cross. That railway line was removed many decades ago. The area no longer has the stodgy conservatism it once had, and neither is it as quiet or as homogeneous, as its pavements today are packed with those from every conceivable background or place on the planet. There is a more adventurous or innovative air to the place, and politically it is now Lib-Dem or Labour rather than Tory – a transformation which would have shattered the illusions of my grandparents' generation.

The house in which I had been brought up was 196 Muswell Hill Road, close to the centre and not many yards from St. James's church where we worshipped regularly. These were what my father proudly described as his "Professional premises." There was a steep flight of steps and a sloping red-tiled path leading up to the front door. My mother disliked the house, not only because of the difficulty in negotiating a pram up and down the outside steps, but because of the many steep staircases within the house, and what she felt was the bad design of the place. To the right of the steps leading up to the front door was another flight of steps leading down to the door of the coal cellar. Once inside the long hallway which had a decoratively tiled floor in several colours, on the left side was my grandfather's surgery, and on the right side my father's – a much smaller room. When I was about ten years of age, the use of the rooms was reversed, and when my grandfather began to work part-time, he became the junior partner in the practice.

On the left side of the hall, beyond the surgery, was a door leading into the waiting room. This was a large long silent room with a black oak dresser backing onto the wall with the surgery on the other side. The dresser had Toby jugs on its shelves and other ugly pieces of ceramic ware. There was a large brown leather sofa and matching armchairs, and several upright Edwardian chairs with cane seats, and a bookcase loaded with *Punch* annuals dating from the start of the century. Finally, there was a gate-legged table with the latest issues of *Country Life, The Tatler, Punch, The Lady,* and of course, *The Times*, and, *The Financial Times*. The far end of the room looked out onto a patio, and beyond that was a modest garden, most of it lawn.

Returning to the hallway, straight ahead on the left was a swing door leading down some steps, and to the right was the Nurse's (or dental assistant's room), with desk, cupboards and filing cabinets. The Nurse was Miss Gallant, who was employed in the post for some 50 years by both my grandfather and father. She wore the blue uniform and starched collars and cap customary at the time, and was already middle-aged when I knew her. She had once been engaged, but her fiancé was killed in the First World War, and so as with most women of her generation, she was doomed to a life of spinsterhood. She attended to all the phone calls and the booking of appointments, and the card index in the filing cabinets, etc., in addition to work in the two surgeries. She had a formal businesslike manner, but she was kind and sometimes took us children out to a pantomime or for some other treat. My mother regarded her with slight ridicule because of her fussy and over-conscientious attitude.

Leading to the back door of the house was a dank, dark, stone-floored storage area where gas and oxygen cylinders were kept, and a cupboard where ether and chemicals were stored. There were always strange smells in the place. On one occasion when my father was sorting things around, I picked up a bottle and asked what it contained. "Ether," he replied. – "What does it smell like,?" I asked. – "I'll show you," he replied, and taking a wad of cotton wool, he tipped the bottle onto it, and held the wool over my nose. I experienced an unpleasant shock, and he laughed at my discomfort. "I won't do that again until you need a tooth out," he said. On the right side of the garden, near to the house, was a workshop for the dental mechanic, Mr. Kemp, who was in full-time employment by the practice.

Returning to the house, by the garden door, and straight ahead was a door leading down into the cellar with its whitewashed walls and separate compartments for storing coke and coal. The cellar was where we were to spend many nights in our dressing gowns sitting in deckchairs during the bombing in the years ahead. Returning to the main hallway, on the right hand side and straight ahead were the steep stairs leading up to the first landing. Straight ahead was a toilet on the left, and the bathroom on the right, both looking out onto the back garden. On the right was the kitchen, with a coke burning range for heating the water, a sink near the window overlooking the back garden, a kitchen table, gas oven, and a pulley at the far end of the room where washing was hung to dry.

Ascending another flight of stairs led to the living quarters proper. These rooms were not only hideously decorated but profoundly depressing on the spirit – or so I found them from a very early age. My parents had decided to be fashionable – or certainly my mother – and being fashionable in the context of furnishings (or certainly when following post-19th century design), invariably means following what aesthetically is ephemeral and tawdry. My parents therefore had a slavish appreciation of everything which was up-to-date in the 1930s, something which was not replicated, I am glad to say, by my other

relatives. The Browns, for example, lived in a house more elegantly and conservatively decorated, that is, imitation Chippendale and Regency style wallpaper, etc., which although unexciting artistically, was at least not unpleasing to the eye.

The architecture of the house was good imitation Tudor – that is, the external beams were twisted and warped, so giving the false impression of having been exposed to centuries of inclement weather. The only thing which I loathed in their house was the chime of the walnut grandmother clock on the sideboard in the dining room, with its high-pitched modern sound having none of the redolence or grandeur of an ancient grandfather clock. The chime of this clock at once alerted one to the fact that everything in the house was indeed imitation, and reminded one that this was not a long-established residence, but the home of those belonging to the nouveau riche.

As became the 1930s, there were no hanging pictures, and so the walls were bare and boring, covered with cream coloured wallpaper with a mottled surface. Framed family portraits stood on shelves and mantelpieces, and the furniture was probably chosen by my mother, for although my father had neatness to a fault, he had little aesthetic sense. Most of the furniture, including the tea trolley (which is now in my possession) was light coloured oak bought from Heals, and there was plain wall-to-wall carpeting in the three rooms which may be designated the first floor. These rooms were, left to right, the dining room and lounge, with windows looking onto the main road, and my parents' bedroom with a window facing onto the back garden.

The latter was twin-bedded as my mother was averse to double beds, and very late in life she admitted disliking sex except for the specific purpose of procreation. She told me this in a humorous tone of voice in her late 80s, but she was otherwise liberal in her sexual attitudes and appreciated the sexual needs of others. My father, although supposedly strongly sexed, and he enjoyed the favours of other women during his married life, probably took little offence at my mother's reserve in this respect. I have reached this conclusion from various remarks he made when I was a 16-year old, during painfully formal sessions, when I had to sit down and be told about "the birds and the bees." On one of these embarrassing sessions (during which I learned little of any significance I did not already know) he explained that the "male" derives pleasure from sexual intercourse but not the "female" unless she had a "degenerate character." Nice women passively accepted intercourse as a moral obligation to their husbands. I was then warned against consorting with prostitutes, or loose women, or any who found pleasure in the sexual act. As to whether my father actually believed this nonsense or not – or continued to believe it after a certain period of his life – I was never to discover. In view of his actual success with women during his mature life (i.e. beyond the age of 40), I have my doubts. He probably perpetuated these myths to keep me away from *all* women, and such a view will be substantiated later in this memoir.

On the landing of this first floor, a frightening African carving of an evil-looking face was suspended on the wall between the entrance to the dining room and lounge. It was aptly known as the Devil. It was one of the monstrosities my grandfather had brought back from South Africa at the start of the century. Another flight of steep stairs led up to a mezzanine floor where my father's dressing room was situated at the back of the house. This doubled up as the dreaded punishment room. It always had an unpleasant smell of mothballs. In a tallboy my father kept his precious collection of bow ties, cuff links, collars and studs; in a wardrobe he had a large collection of suits and blazers for all occasions, overcoats for differing weather conditions; and in another cupboard he had a wonderful collection of exotic waistcoats. There was also a shoe cupboard with a vast collection of shoes of every conceivable kind – all in immaculate condition.

Clothes were my father's most precious possessions of which he was inordinately proud. He was always a snappy dresser, and since he had the time and space to quietly look through his collection every morning, he rarely wore the same tie or jacket for several days in succession. As I always disdained dandyism as the vanity of those who sought to compensate for other deficiencies, I never learned to take an interest in clothes, and tended to despise those who did. I chose my clothes for warmth and utility, and was only prepared for such expenditure when they fell apart, and my parents never encouraged me to dress with elegance. In later life it needed my wife and daughters to drag me to the outfitters to make an essential purchase.

On the linoleum floor of the dressing room was a blue and orange woollen mat lovingly woven by my father whilst a student at Guy's. It bore the hospital's coat of arms. It was on this mat that my younger brother and I were placed, and our necks bent forward for the bare-bottomed thrashings with a specially selected cane purchased for the purpose from the local ironmonger.

Another flight of stairs led to the top landing. On the far left were two large doors leading into the roof space. I never entered this area but it was used for storing trunks and cases. There were three rooms on the top landing: on the left the maid's room with a low ceiling and squat window looking out to the road, and a marble topped wash stand with a jug and bowl, for the maids were not allowed to use the bathroom; then the nursery, a large room with bars over the windows, also looking out onto the front; and a back room, painted dark green, also with a sloping ceiling in alignment with the roof, usually reserved for the nanny. This room, mysteriously, for a reason I never discovered, always exuded an unpleasant smell reminiscent of liquorice. On a shelf was a picture of three horses' heads, which gave me nightmares during those periods when I slept in the room. There was also a green fluorescent figure which in the dark gave out a ghostly light.

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My mother described me as a nervous hysterical child, full of irrational fears, and terrified by flies and other flying insects. My earliest memories are of sitting in a high chair eating the baby food Bemax, and I can still smell and taste the cereal after all that time. It was eaten from a high-sided plate decorated with three yellow chicks, and it is recorded that my first spoken words were not "Mamma" or "Papa," but "bore, bore," meaning "more," and I have seldom been fastidious over food. At that time it was considered advisable to underfeed rather than overfeed babies, and a certain greed, over-acquisitiveness, or aggression may have developed from this feeding system. I am not regretting this regime, for underfeeding may indeed lead to a healthier life in later years than allowing a child to eat its fill, bearing in mind the factors which have led to the obesity and serious health risks encountered by the younger generation today.

I next remember sitting on the nursery floor, all alone, looking out onto the landing and the descending stairs beyond, and hearing a hammering which gradually became nearer and nearer. Eventually, a monstrous dark figure appeared below the stairs, an ancient and disfigured old man with a greasy dirty flat cap, a huge brush-like moustache, and threatening metal spikes protruding from his mouth. I screamed in terror at this frightful spectre. He ignored me, but took the spikes from his mouth, and hammered them into the floor carpet. It was Jake, the handyman, and even when it was explained who he was, I always remained afraid when he visited the house.

My next recollection is of sitting in my pram in Muswell Hill, and being confronted by old men with long beards, sometimes with waxed moustaches, pince-nez, or trilbys, and always with starched collars with rounded corners. These ancient Victorians viewed me with admiration, and their eyes glinted with a sensuous expression. I stared back at them fascinated. I became obsessed by the appearance of these old men, and on one occasion my mother said I had caused her acute embarrassment, when I exclaimed, "He looks so old, he's going to fall down dead!" Their psychological effect was curious, for when I lay in bed with a pleasurable erection, it was always the faces of these old men which I found sexually arousing. In later life I could never imagine how such perverse feelings and thoughts could have occurred in this way.

When I was a toddler, my nanny took me to Waterlow Park, probably one of the most beautiful of the smaller North London parks, situated below Highgate Village. Whilst my nanny was seated on a park bench talking to a mother with several children, I saw a pretty little blonde girl in a pink dress, a year or two older than me, and I was suddenly overcome with a deep affection for her. I chased her down the grassy bank and then up again, but she refused to respond to my gestures of affection, and either I may have frightened her or perhaps she just took me for a "silly boy." Shortly afterwards the nanny put me back into the pushchair and we left the park, and I felt deeply sad at parting from my first love.

The following episode took place when I was just two years old, and this is proven by the fact that Old Nanny, who was a temp and features in the story, appears in a photograph with me in the garden in the Summer of 1937. She was giving me a bath one evening when I said I wanted a pee, and requested to be taken to the toilet. “You can use the bath,” she said. To me this seemed somehow wrong, besides being unclean, but she insisted. As I stood in the bath she held my penis as I pissed into the bathwater, and her behaviour seemed strange at the time. She was an old woman dressed like a nun, with a veil and a long black dress to her ankles.

At the age of three my mother bought a French bulldog, Beau, so that I might become more accustomed to animals, and lose my fear of those dogs I encountered in the street and of all other living things which moved on legs. We already had a tabby cat called George, but he led his own life and took no notice of me. Beau was a black and white dog with pointed ears and disagreeable expression. He was bought as a puppy but grew up to be hypersensitive, nervous, and then aggressive. Perhaps there was something in the household environment which rubbed off on his character. He was said to fight with all other dogs and I did not get on with him. On one occasion he even jumped out of a high window, although he survived the feat. My mother finally dismissed him as dysfunctional and “mad” in failing to fit in with our family life, and so he was eventually given away to new owners.

The following story was told to me by my mother, but I have no recollection of the incident. I was a demanding child and often fell into furious rages if my wishes were not satisfied. One day whilst in Archway Road my mother bought me a Dinky toy. As we progressed along the road we passed another shop where I saw another Dinky toy I liked better. I was told that I already had a new toy and should be content with that. Thereupon I fell into a frenzy and hurled my new toy into the middle of the road. To punish me, my mother stopped by the kerbside to await the crushing of the object by a passing vehicle, and when this occurred, I screamed disconsolately at my tragic loss.

When I was three years old (and there is a witness to vouch for the date accuracy of this story) I found myself ascending in a crowded lift in Selfridges. I was with my cousin, Carol, ten years older than me, who recollected the episode clearly, and my mother, and we were meeting other relatives for tea on one of the upper floors. A young woman in a green costume took out a cigarette and ignited her lighter, but her hand burst out in flames and she began screaming. She shook her hand, but for some reason the lighter stuck to her fingers. The elderly lift attendant, in his magnificent green uniform and epaulettes, knocked the lighter onto the floor, and the fire was immediately extinguished. I was not frightened by the event but curious at what happened.

The following event I remember with crystal clarity as if it was yesterday. It was dark and late at night, and my parents had gone out to a function. I needed to get up for a pee, and the nanny began to lead me

downstairs to the toilet. As we stood on the landing outside my father's dressing room, looking down to the first floor, I was suddenly overcome by a feeling of profound depression at the silence, emptiness, and loneliness of the house. Through the darkness in the lounge I espied the glimmering chromium plated ashtray atop its two-foot column and the weighted base where the ash and cigarette ends were dropped. I was struck by the ugliness of this 1930s artefact and how it oppressed the soul.

During these early years I was haunted by terrible nightmares. One recurring dream was of being chased by lions down dark tunnels until finally I was trapped on both sides when I awoke. Another dream was of hurtling along, to my great terror, at great speed in a noisy underground carriage, as my mother lay outstretched on one of the seats, with hideously contorted Clytemnestra-like features, pointed nose, deep sunken eyes, blood red lips and a snow-white pallid complexion, as she laughed triumphantly at my fear.

My younger brother, Gavin Russell, was born on 16th May 1938. He was supposed to be a girl – or that was the overwhelming wish of my father, for he was long known to love little girls whilst loathing boys – or at least, other people's boys. He was not born in a famous West End nursing home, as I had been, but in a more modest home in Alexandra Park road at the other side of Muswell Hill. I clearly remember being taken along by my father to visit my mother, and standing in the room where my mother and brother were accommodated, but I did not register what followed as it was related many years later. My father was handed the wrapped baby, and after making a pretence for some moments of being pleased with the bundle, he handed it back to my mother, exclaiming, "I don't want it. You can have it back," and my mother was hurt by the gesture but felt she could say nothing in reply.

My brother was never forgiven for being born a boy, and my father never hid his dislike for his second son. Although I incurred more thrashings than my brother, I believe that he was more damaged by my father's attitude. As a first-born, and despite all my faults, I was still expected to have a destiny of some significance, but my brother remained an irrelevance because of the disappointment of his birth. The overhanging shadow of my father's power haunted him for years after his death at the age of 83 in 1990. My brother was cursed with nightmares of the reappearance of our father proclaiming his living status, and returning from an inexplicable absence to attend to his financial affairs, and claw back what had wrongly been passed onto his heirs. I, on the other hand, accepted my father's death and was relieved at his going. I saw him in his coffin and knew he was dead, and as he lay there, pallid with a wax-like complexion, it seemed as if his features had been transformed into those of his mother, who had died 40 years before. My brother, on the contrary, could not face the horrific obligation of paying his respects in this way in visiting the Chapel of Rest.

On only one occasion was I subsequently haunted by a dream of my father. I found myself in the lounge at 196 Muswell Hill Road, and I was vomiting undigested soft bread rolls, and pulling them out of my mouth as they were thrust up into my gullet. My father began to rush about with a sense of determined purpose. "What are you going to do?" I asked apprehensively. He made no answer and I could see he intended to make none as he resolutely pursued his dreadful task. He took up an enamel tray, placing surgical knives and other instruments into the containers. I repeated my question louder and more desperately, but I need not have done so. Already I knew his intentions. He was to cut open my stomach, and remove its contents. He took up a syringe and drew in liquid from a phial, all the while remaining stubbornly silent. Then, with a sudden gesture, he thrust the needle through my jacket into my upper arm. At that point I did something which I never did in real life – or would never dare to do – I fell into a defiant rage, snatching the syringe out of my arm and throwing it across the room, before waking up to a world of sanity.

The dream reflected his behaviour in real life whilst I was a small child. He would never answer questions or explain his actions if engaged in some medical task, as he felt this was an imposition on his professional status, beyond the comprehension of the lay person – and certainly of a child. This is illustrated by an episode when I had bad colds and earache when he forcefully stuffed cotton wool into my ears, rather in the way a dentist would stuff material into a tooth to be filled. The outcome was unfortunate for I became stone deaf – or so said my mother. The doctor then had to be called to the house, and I remember his visit and my fear at having to have my ears syringed. I watched in horror as the doctor drew out his instruments and began to assemble the syringe, and in my naivety, I asked him if he could perform his task whilst I stood at one end of the room whilst he stood at the other – in other words if my ears could be hosed out at a distance, rather as a fireman extinguishes a fire. He made no answer, and when he performed the operation I suffered excruciating pain. The outcome was that the cotton wool was successfully flushed out, and I regained my hearing to the full. It is strange that such an experience should give rise to a nightmare some 50 years after the event.

About this book – *This Was My England*

Few books evoke the private life of an era, as it was in England between 1935 and 1954, with such clarity, as this autobiography. And it is only through such an intimate memoir that the hidden aspects of an age – so often lost to future generations – may be revealed as social history.

It comprises the "confession" of a prolific author, with all his thoughts and feelings, and no attempt to conceal his faults or failings. Whilst his happiest memories were as an evacuee at his grandparents' home in Wiltshire, his return to the dreaded London home brought brutal corporal punishment and periods of misery in a rigidly religious environment. But on being sent to a well-established boarding school, he went unknowingly from the frying pan to the fire, where he endured horrifying ritual torture and permanent physical injuries.

He subsequently went to a North London public school, and although was never to be bullied again, was witness to, and partly implicated in anti-Semitism as a pre-teenager at the time of the British-Israeli conflict in Palestine. He was to complete his formal education in a liberal co-educational school in Hampstead under the inspiration and sound values of a brilliant teaching staff.

During his mid-teenage years, he was involved in a hopeless and self-destructive love for a film star, eventually leading to gestures – if not attempts – at suicide and murder, and this led inevitably to the disruption of his formal academic achievement. The psychological crisis led to a split between two sides of his family as to his future direction at the end of full-time education.

The book could not have been written unless the author had kept a detailed journal and diaries which were recovered from an attic, and read for the first time after a period of 60 years. The narrative which is filled with humour and ironic observations, and a host of colourful characters, concludes with a description of his life in an old-established solicitors' office. It is only in these final chapters, prior to National Service, that he began to regain his sanity.