

LIFE AFTER 18

A memoir by John Ford

I was in the middle before I knew I had begun.

To Valerie

Sine qua non

FOREWORD

One of my favourite authors, the German writer Erich Kastner, was addicted to writing forewords and sometimes had to remind himself that no foreword should exist without a book. I'm in the opposite camp and am anxious for brevity. So I shall just say that in this memoir, written with considerable trepidity, I have tried to tell the truth but have often carefully refrained from telling the whole truth. This is, I am fairly sure, much more often to conceal my own stupidities than those of my friends.

I end this memoir with a poem of peace, depicting two lovers asleep in bed. How I wish my wife's life, and mine, could end so. But no one ever writes the end of their autobiography.

LIFE AFTER 18

1. PETERHOUSE

I'm sitting at home on a Saturday afternoon. The sun is shining, there is a beautiful garden outside, and I'm not starving. There is food for several days in the fridge. There are several comfortable bedrooms upstairs and even one downstairs. We have, believe it or not, four bathrooms. I can hear my wife in the next room. Of course there are worries. I am 78 and death cannot be too far away. My wife not only has Parkinson's disease but until recently had to care for her 98-year-old mother, bedridden and speechless in her part of the house at the back. She died from the Corona virus in February 2021 aged 98. Many possible problems of care loom ahead for us. I don't fear death, but I do very much fear the dying process. Even so, life is good. So: how did I arrive here, in this large airy room, crammed too full with books and pictures, when not long after my 18th birthday I was filled with melancholy, and had a bad stammer? I often lay awake at night wondering what my future held. This memoir is an attempt to find out. And perhaps – just perhaps – important things may happen while I am writing this.

This room I'm writing in provides many clues to my past. I'd have found such a room interminably boring when I was a small boy. Now it contains many hints about my family. Behind me, on the piano, stands a wooden plate decorated with a bird such as never existed save maybe in the jungles of New Guinea. On the back are inscribed the words "Designed by Yamamoto Kansai", a well-known Japanese artist who died in 2020. Its history begins far beyond Yamamoto's birth, in the mid-1930s in Shanghai, where Henry McAleavy, a Lancastrian sinologist and a friend of my father, a British consul there, was bold enough to fall in love with a young Japanese girl. They got married, and her family abandoned her. When her husband died young in London in 1968 my father and others stayed friendly with her and buried her on her death – by fire in her Battersea Park flat. There was no response from Japan, until many years later a young Japanese banker appeared in London, took my parents out for a very expensive Japanese meal, and gave them this plate.

All this happened many years after I went up to Cambridge in 1963. There are two sorts of gloom: unvaried gloom, occasionally leading to attempts, sometimes successful, at suicide, and a different gloom, often enough interrupted by a watery sun smiling uncertainly through half-smiling clouds. At Cambridge University I suffered from the second sort. I had come from Lancing College, proud, too proud, of my success in getting there with a history scholarship but very apprehensive about the future. The scholarship was to some extent a fluke, as I should have realised. It was also unfortunate that almost all my friends from Lancing College had gone to Oxford.

I remember almost nothing of my first year at Peterhouse. I occupied a room in Old Court with a fine view of the gardens south towards the Fitzwilliam Museum. I can recall clearly just one single afternoon in the summer term of 1964 playing a record of Mozart's piano concerto in E flat (K. 449) when I was feeling very unhappy. Listening to the concerto helped a bit, but not very much, as I knew it would come to an end. In those days you could not use YouTube to put Mozart everlastingly on a loop. I also remember tiny widely separated shreds of time I spent with my supervisor, Tony (later Sir Anthony) Wrigley. Wrigley is now recognised as one of our outstanding experts in population studies and was made a Fellow of the British Academy in

1980. Then he was a young man of 33, but to me he seemed utterly uninterested in anything I wrote, and devoid of suggestions for improvements. This may be grossly unfair. It would be fascinating to go back in time and peer through an open window to hear what actually happened. Quite an interesting play might start exactly like that. Of course, I might have got a considerable shock if I could. At the end of that first year I failed to get the expected first, though I did get a reasonable 2:1. I was upset, but stupidly did not ask for advice on how to improve. Quite possibly Dr Wrigley did give me unasked a lot of advice which I completely ignored.

Although Peterhouse is an old college, in fact the oldest in the university, my last two years there were spent in the new William Stone Building where I was in the first cohort to move in. The building was designed by Leslie Martin and Colin Wilson and is without doubt one of the most interesting structures erected in Cambridge during the last century, often visited by devotees of modern architecture, some of whom disturbed me, not always politely, when I was trying to revise for exams. There were teething problems. It was I believe the first building in Cambridge to have under-floor central heating and this did not always work well. Sometimes there was no heating at all, not a good thing in winter in Cambridge; and occasionally it was so hot that walking on the floor was a bit like tiptoeing on hot bricks. There was one bathroom per floor for five students. Nowadays I believe all these rooms are en-suite. I was on the fifth floor in room F5 with once again a superb view, this time across the water meadows westwards to the river Cam. This was a big bonus, even though in my last summer a manic bagpiper often disturbed my early morning revisions with his many sadly uncontrolled sounds. I never learnt for what event he was rehearsing. Perhaps he was just having fun. If it is true that Prince Albert begged his wife not to order bagpipers to play under their window at Balmoral, I can sympathise with him. Sometimes late-night croquet games on the lawn below could be a problem too. If you start playing almost any ball game in the early evening, it is amazing how your eyes adjust to the incoming dark, especially if it's a warm balmy night. However, do take care doing this: it can lead to being sick (see below).

Between the old part of the college and the William Stone building there is a beautiful long garden through which I walked nearly every day to dinner and often for tutorials. As I walked I usually mumbled to myself again and again the words: "Uncertain issues struggling for refinement". These words could theoretically form a line of poetry, but make such poor poetry in isolation that I hesitate to write them down. I never got beyond this line. I thought if I could something exciting might result. It never did. And always during that walk from the William Stone Building across the garden, I felt I was not a real person at all, but an actor, pretending to be someone I wasn't. This of course is the secret to playing Hamlet well: to avoid pretending you aren't acting, so the actual events of the play rush upon you like so many scary disparate pieces of reality. But I wasn't playing Hamlet.

There were many reasons for this failure to write any single line of poetry, which became more obvious to me the longer I studied there. One was simply being at Cambridge. I had an idea, silly for most people and probably for me, that I might become a poet there; and although many poets have attended Cambridge University, none as far as I know ever wrote any worthwhile poetry *in situ*. Nor was this just because they were young. I suspect strongly that Thomas Gray, a fellow of Peterhouse till he fled across the road to Pembroke College, wrote all of his best poetry at his family home at Stoke Poges in Buckinghamshire 70 miles away.

I also had an extremely faulty technique. I had written poetry at school: poor unorganised stuff, but a real expression of how I felt, even if embarrassingly obscure at times. Now I felt that my poetry needed a proper structure, both intellectually and practically, and this I lacked the facility

to provide. I knew little about verse forms and even less about how to manipulate them. I knew there were poetry societies in the university, but was far too shy to attend them. It didn't occur to me that many others in the same position as me would probably be attending them and might even have helped me. Maybe I could even have helped them. Experts are not always the best teachers. Perhaps all this might have been true: but the truth is that not just Cambridge but any university is not the best place to write poetry. Universities are institutions founded to pursue intellectual pursuits, and writing poetry is emphatically not primarily an intellectual occupation, although a knowledge of things intellectual may be a useful adjunct or preparation to writing it.

There was another reason for my paralysis. I hesitate to mention it, as in doing so there is a risk that this essay may collapse into the particular ditch reserved for all those who trundle on obsessively about their handicaps. But my stammer, until now not usually an overbearing factor in my life, suddenly began to dominate it. I was sure every fellow undergraduate was at once aware of it when we talked, and reading my essays out to the tutors who sadly had to listen to them became a mutual ordeal, a problem I had rarely faced in class at school. I think my stammer made it difficult for them to judge my work. I did not know how to cope with this, and nor did anyone else. A particular terror was saying grace in hall, which as a scholar I was expected to do at least once each term. In my last year Maurice Cowling, my tutor, wrote to my father saying that although I was held in considerable affection and respect by the teachers and undergraduates at the school – which may have been true, but I doubt it – I badly needed help. He suggested I should see a speech therapist in London, a Mr Burgess. I did indeed see him for several years, but although I liked him his help was temporary, not permanent. In the end he went broke and ended up in a lunatic asylum.

That last sentence is both truthful and very unfair, a classic example of why in an English court witnesses, in theory at least, have to swear to tell not just the truth but the whole truth. In fact Henry Burgess was very helpful to me and I cannot remember in detail why I stopped seeing him. I can remember several years later my father phoning me at work and asking me whether it would be wise to lend him money he had asked for to pay his rent. I had no idea how to answer, but I'm sure my father paid up. He was a very generous man.

Both then and now little is understood about the causes of stammering. Each speech therapist therefore had his own approach to the problem, which occasionally might work to some extent if your kind of stammering – for there are many different kinds – suited his or her ideas. On my first visit Henry Burgess gave me a card on which he had printed a short prose passage for me to read out. He suggested I read it out loud, but with no unvoiced sections, so that, for example, I pronounced a “p” as a “b”, and “s” as “z”. He thought, rightly, that alternating voiced and unvoiced passages was often technically difficult for stammerers and made blocking or hesitation more likely. In my case he was right. He taught me to abandon unvoicing completely when I thought I might stammer. This often worked for me; listeners either did not notice or noticed much less than if I had stammered.

I wish now I had persevered with this technique much more determinedly. But despite Mr Burgess's efforts, I kept trying to persuade myself not that my stammer didn't exist – even I wasn't that stupid - but that tomorrow, or next month, or next year, it would suddenly disappear, melt away like a tiny iceberg in the sun. I think many young stammerers feel this. The failures that enveloped me in the next few years might, or might not, have been prevented, but at least I would have found out more about myself if I'd not been so naïve. Even today there is no certain cure for stammering. Instead many speech therapists concentrate more on trying to help stammerers accept their situation and to become less embarrassed by it. Perhaps also non-

stammerers should try to become less embarrassed by stammering. But this is a huge and potentially controversial subject, well covered in a recent book by Jonty Claypole, *Words Fail Us*.

I remember two other things about visiting Mr Burgess which are far more revealing about me than him. When I first went down to London to see him from Cambridge, with typical carelessness I confused Kensington Park Gardens, where he lived, with Kensington Palace Gardens, and wondered why on arriving I was subjected to being frisked by guards who told me I had entered the Israeli Embassy. Then when I did arrive at the correct address I met another man slightly older than me who was also waiting to be seen. He was, he told me, called “Sparrow” Harrison, and it is revealing that to this day I do not know his proper first name. He was working in a garage – I think he may have owned it - and later became the joint founder of what is now called the British Stammering Association. I instantly liked him but did not wish to become his friend because to do so would be to admit to myself that I had a stammer which was not about to disappear. I am ashamed of writing these words but they are true. If I had remained his friend I might just have been some help when he founded the British Stammering Association a few years later. And my life might have been enriched in many unpredictable ways.

My weekly exits from Cambridge to see Mr Burgess had one advantage; I usually looked around the National Gallery afterwards and gradually got to know a few of the paintings there. Like many Englishmen before me I began with the Dutch school. Although I could see what a wonderful painter Rembrandt was, I preferred quieter painters such as de Hooch and Vermeer. Perhaps somehow by looking at them I could steal some of their calmness and paste it into my own life. I failed, of course, but I learnt that a world existed outside the turbulent competitiveness of the Cambridge University history school. I forgot – and perhaps it was right to forget – that painting, unless or even if you have a private income, can be a fiercely competitive activity too.

I visited the gallery for one other pathetic purpose; I discovered, quite rightly, that such a gallery is a good place to approach women without being offensive, but I was much too frightened actually to do this. Beautiful dresses and figures, and even more sympathetic faces, stand out wonderfully against Claudes and Poussins. I remember best sitting for what seemed like hours in the Wallace collection at Hertford House and contemplating Rubens’s rainbow landscape while young ladies walked past. At least I had the sense not to follow them around the gallery.

Some reading this, particularly many stammerers, may wish I’d based this whole memoir around my stammer. But although at times it has indeed dominated my life, I rail against the idea that it has been the most important factor in it. There have been times, particularly recently, when I have almost forgotten about it for weeks at a time. In my poetry I never refer to it, and certainly not through any conscious censorship. All I can do is mention it when I think it’s relevant. And getting older has one advantage; you worry less and less what other people think of you.

Studying history was yet another reason for my melancholy. I’d excelled in it at school and in my exam to reach Cambridge. But I was not really interested in it as a single subject to study, and the idea of doing research in it appalled me. Fiddling around in libraries and making notes from old manuscripts and books was not for me. But what did I want to do instead? I had no idea. I wanted to travel, to read any book that took my fancy, above all speak normally. But what I didn’t want to do was lock myself away in libraries doing research. Nor did I believe that grand

explanations about the causes of things, so beloved by some but not all historians, were possible. To me there were three things worth pursuing in life: family happiness, creative glory, and scientific research if one had the good luck and ability to succeed, which I didn't. The reader may notice that the idea of helping anyone, either personally or through joining a charity or a political organization, did not then enter my mind.

The course, too, was not well designed for me. I found political history dull; cultural history would have been more interesting. Given a choice between reading Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, I would have chosen Vasari every time. I loved reading about the enlightenment and the religious ideas behind the reformation, but that hardly seemed to be covered in our studies. It was not by chance that *The Heavenly City of the 18th Century Philosophers* by Carl Becker became one of my favourite books. We could have learned more about the Hapsburg Empire; the little we did learn included nothing about the great composers who lived in or near Vienna in the 18th and 19th centuries. These will surely be remembered when everything else about the Hapsburgs and the fascinating but convoluted politics of early modern central Europe is forgotten.

Also, both my tutors after Tony Wrigley turned out to be – dare I say it? – dull. Or, to be fairer, dull for me, dull for the sort of person I was then. The better known of them today is Maurice Cowling. He was very kind to me, although we did once have an acerbic argument about how far Britain was changed in its manners and customs by the Second World War. He wrote an interesting, controversial and partially wrong book about the reasons for British foreign policy changes in the 1930s. I hasten to add that this book, and indeed all his books, are well worth reading. They make you think again carefully about matters that you had assumed were true, even if at the end your opinions remain unchanged. *Mill and Liberalism* is a good example of this. But at school, at Lancing College, I'd been taught by two masters who outshone him and his colleagues in their learning, wit and broadness of interests. One was Roger Lockyer, later a reader in history at Royal Holloway College, whose book on Charles I's favourite, the Duke of Buckingham is one of the best political biographies of the last century. There is a chapter in it on the state of politics at the beginning of Charles I's reign which should be read by anyone who wants to understand English history in the 17th century. His colleague Harry Guest turned into one of our best 20th century poets and an expert on Japan and Japanese literature. Anyone visiting Japan would do well to consult his guidebook on its literature. Partly through luck, and partly through Harry Guest's kindness, I remained a friend of his for the rest of his life, even though at times that friendship through absence hung by a thread which occasionally nearly snapped. I thought rightly that no-one who taught me at Peterhouse was in their league. Above all, none of those who taught me appeared to have a sense of humour. Perhaps I might have profited if Kingsley Amis had not resigned his Peterhouse fellowship the very year I went up. I might, however, have had a word with him about his apparent dislike of madrigals. He might then have rightly reminded me that a character's views in a novel are not necessarily those of its author.

Ironically there was at least one person at Cambridge who might just have helped me had I been brazen enough to approach him: Basil Willey, who had studied at Peterhouse long before me and whose books on the cultural background of England in the 18th and 19th centuries are masterpieces. He was at Cambridge with me as King Edward Professor of English Literature. I ought to have been bold enough to write to him. Probably he wouldn't have seen me, but who knows? In any case I was far too shy to do anything as demonstrative as this.

After I left Peterhouse in 1966 the history dons at the college became well known for challenging what they regarded, probably accurately, as the establishment view of British history. Maurice Cowling's views on appeasement – he was broadly in favour of it – were only one aspect of this. Many were in favour of Margaret Thatcher's reforms, an attitude which infuriated many people, both at Cambridge and outside. This made for a lot of fun if you agreed with them, but if you were a bewildered undergraduate like me, vaguely suspecting that they were wrong, it made for confusion. I found the broadly Christian atmosphere inculcated at Lancing by headmasters such as John Dancy and William Gladstone a friendlier environment in which to think. Did this mean I was immature? Perhaps. It certainly did not mean I was Christian. And there is often something valuable in challenging accepted views.

If this paragraph sounds confused, this is because I was, and am, confused about such things. How can so many people seem so certain about so many things? Music is certain, poetry is certain; whether you like specific examples of them or not they certainly exist. They exist because their creation lies in the past. But was it right to declare war on Germany in 1939? Suppose Britain hadn't. Many more Jews would probably have survived, escaping via France and Italy; Britain's declaration of war cut off their only possible exit. But then Poland and Czechoslovakia would have remained enslaved. But for how long? One reason Churchill thought it was better to ally with the Soviet Union than Germany was because he believed German rule in Europe would have been severer and lasted longer than communist rule. But suppose he had been wrong. And how could anyone know that he had been wrong? A little scepticism about all our actions, personal and political, is to my mind a good thing. Having said that, sometimes action is necessary.

That some dons at Cambridge did have a sense of humour was proved in my last year when I chose Pope Pius II as my special subject. I knew almost nothing about Pope Pius, but even less about the alternative subjects. My tutor was Ralph Bennett, who significantly was not a fellow of Peterhouse. He was director of studies at Magdalene College. He dealt with my stammer brusquely, sensitively and competently without my ever really understanding he was doing so. Perhaps he didn't understand the process either. Every tutorial with him was fun, which did not exclude hard work as well. I felt there was a deep hinterland in his mind, which occasionally he drew on when the subject demanded it. A clue was a large map of North Africa on the wall whose markings showed it had been used in the war. He told me when I asked him that he had been on Montgomery's staff. What he didn't tell me was that he had spent 4 years at Bletchley Park. I had no idea about this until three books by him on the subject began to appear in the 1980s. He made Pope Pius, a fascinating subject for a biography today, really come alive. To my shame I have never visited Pienza in Italy which Pius planned as his memorial.

There was finally a shameful reason why I was unhappy at Cambridge. I was immature enough to need encouragement and praise for my work, which I felt I never got, except from Ralph Bennett. This however is not the job of university tutors as it is the duty of teachers at a school. So here was I at one of the best and most beautiful universities in the world, and I was melancholy. Whose fault was that?

At least I realised that soulful melancholy in a young man is not attractive in our age; even totally ungifted romantics in the 19th century did it so much better, but then they were born in the right age for it. Whatever I felt, I concealed it from others, and especially when I wrote to my parents abroad, where I knew my mother worried about me constantly. Any letter written by me then and read by me now – for my parents kept many of my letters – has a particularly jarring effect. Did my parents suspect anything? I suspect only partly, my mother much more than my father. I find

on rereading them that my letters were certainly entertainingly written, but invariably almost completely untruthful in expressing how I felt. I was clever at subtly modulating a jaunty cheerfulness.

There were two reliefs from this unceasing watery gloom and the first, especially in my last two years, was music. I had my record player, and although I rarely played it while I was working, before bedtime or maybe whilst dressing I put on my ever-increasing collection of LPs. Bach, Haydn and Mozart were the favourites, and when playing these records I could retreat into a dream world of Alpine lakes, English water meadows in Norfolk and Sussex, and, of course, women. And naturally too there were plenty of concerts.

It is sometime early in 1966. An orchestra – I forget which one – is performing in King’s College Chapel. I remember only one work: Brahms’s second symphony, and particularly its finale. This concert ought not to have been memorable: the finale’s very rhythmical rondo theme needs a very exact acoustic, which, to put it mildly, the chapel doesn’t possess. And then there is the Rubens picture at the east end behind the altar, which ought to jar terribly with its Gothic surroundings. But none of this matters: Brahms’s jaunty feelings of triumphant happiness, so rarely expressed in his music, overwhelm me, and I walk home dancing along Trumpington Street momentarily extremely happy. I know that for a moment I have jumped from the temporal into the eternal.

Although I was a most incompetent clarinettist I did occasionally play with other Peterhouse men in a very scratch wind band. Robert Philip played the bassoon. He has since written several interesting books on classical music and is one of our best present day music critics. Once again I should have been braver, asked him around to my rooms, forgotten about myself and quizzed *him* about what he wanted to do with his life. If you are really interested in how authentic modern performances of older classical music are, then Philip is your man. He has written a most valuable book on the subject.

The other relief was a huge surprise: the Fitzwilliam Museum which lay 2 minutes’ walk from my rooms. In fact at that time the land on which it stood was rented from Peterhouse. It took me some time to discover it was there, but once I had I entered very often, and in fact more often than my essay writing really allowed, even though a foray around the gallery often helped my mind to think more creatively. I have always been better at thinking when walking than when sitting down. I have only a misty recollection of the paintings there, but often recognise them at once when I see them reproduced elsewhere. Veneziano’s *Annunciation* and a picture by Samuel Palmer, *The Magic Apple Tree*, come to mind, though Palmer’s presence as a living person really only entered my mind much later. There is a poem still to be written about Palmer’s purposeful incompetence as a gardener.

There were not many female undergraduates in Cambridge then, and although I had no idea how to approach them and was very frustrated by this, curiously this particular aspect of my situation didn’t particularly depress me. I knew they were out there somewhere, and occasional glimpses of possible future happinesses sometimes gently walked past me. A young lady in the Seeley History Library often seemed to inspect me curiously. All I can remember about her is that she came from Stafford and always sat down cross-legged with her shoes beneath her on her chair. Another lady crashed into me in the street riding her bicycle and did not seem to glance at me with distaste. Finally, in my last year, I did in fact ask a female undergraduate out, sending her a note suggesting we meet at the top of the tower of Great St. Mary’s church, a romantic flourish which surprisingly worked. Meeting there also meant I could not easily flee if

my courage failed me. I knew a quick retreat from such a place if she found me repulsive would not be easy. Apart from trundling through the writing of innumerable boring essays which meant I got “a very good 2:1 which could have been better” – to quote my tutor – rather than the first that was expected of me, this was almost the only wise single thing I can remember doing whilst at Cambridge. The letter in which Maurice Cowling told me this quietly infuriated me. Did he mean that I had been unfairly marked? Or did he mean that I should have written my papers more intelligently? Of course I should either have written and asked him for feedback or forgotten about the whole thing. The fact that I smouldered quietly and did neither revealed a lot about me.

I asked the lady from New Hall out because she had smiled at me. Her name was Priscilla Grasby, and Grasby in Lincolnshire is almost certainly where her father’s forebears came from. She often smiled. She had a pleasing faint Lancastrian accent and was the only child of a schoolmaster, who was head of Classics at Bolton School. She had not been as well taught in history as I at her school, but intelligence and hard work meant that once she reached Cambridge she progressed pleasingly there, gaining a third in her first year, a 2:2 in her second year, and a 2:1 in her third. If she had been allowed a fourth year she would almost certainly have gained a first. We really did not meet very often, but these meetings were important to me because they showed me that a relationship with a woman was possible, even if it was entirely chaste. They showed me, even more valuably, that mere friendship with a woman is one of the most valuable things a man can have. Priscilla was a surprising girl with a very surprising future, much more interesting than mine. One clue: when she told me, as she did once, that the world was too unhappy a place to have children, this was a not entirely accurate prediction of what would happen to her.

I can really remember only one expedition with her, and even here my memory may be faulty. I know we planned to look at Long Melford and Lavenham churches, but I’m not sure if we actually saw them. I do remember that my bicycle broke down at Haverhill – something to do with its chain – and I began to panic because I was supposed to be playing the clarinet at a concert in college that evening. Priscilla was amazingly calm about this. She often exuded a considerable lack of confidence about her future, whereas I rarely talked about mine. She was much wiser than me, even though her lack of confidence was unnecessary. Her maturity when I met her again forty years later amazed me.

It is the spring of 1966. I’ve been playing a disc of the 10th of Vivaldi’s “L’Estro Armonico” concertos on my record player in the arrangement for four harpsichords by Bach. It reverberates through my brain as I cross the garden towards St. Peter’s Terrace. I feel an immense yearning towards a place where this intense happiness can be real all the time. Wherever I am walking to – and I can’t remember where – will I know be a tremendous anti-climax. Should this have been a warning that I was studying in the wrong place?

I did, gradually, get to know two other Petreans. Neither had much influence on me – it might have been better if they had – but both were interesting people. Dion (later he called himself Christopher) Burford came from Wimbledon and had been to the King’s College School there, and coincidentally had been taught history there by Robin Reeve, who had transferred to Lancing College where he taught me in my last two terms there. His father worked for a big chocolate company and Christopher therefore had very radical political views and found communism very attractive. He did not do well in the History Tripos but I suspect this was because his views were too unorthodox for the examiners. At least he had the courage of his convictions and visited Albania to help with the harvest, an experience which to my surprise did

not seem particularly to change his views. He then with great courage decided to become a doctor and ended up a consultant with revolutionary and I think quite effective ideas about helping mentally ill patients.

It took me time to know Christopher, who was charmingly shy and tentative in his approaches to others. Walks around Wimbledon Common, often late at night, where later his parents lived very close to mine, certainly helped. We did not agree about politics. My memories of communist China made me very suspicious of any form of socialism or communism, even though I was only 7 when I left China. The relentless pressure on every Chinese from the extremely authoritarian government did not escape even a 7-year-old. But Christopher and I were able to discuss these matters without rancour, and it was our increasing lack of interests in common that later drove us apart. We were like two streams that rise from springs close to each other but, though we didn't realise it at first, on different sides of a continental divide.

Shahen Abrahamian, an Armenian whose family lived in Teheran, was very different. He hustled me into swift, intellectual conversations the very first day we met on the staircase that we shared in my first year. It was hard to guess he had been to Rugby. He stirred up my mind with many very different ideas, quite a few of which seemed at first sight contradictory. He was much influenced by the political situation in Iran in ways which I could not begin to understand. I was also shamefully not much interested. I was bored by abroad – a perverse result of my father working in the Foreign Office - and by the foreign politics by which he was so fascinated. I had travelled abroad so much in my youth that I wanted to get to know England, my home country. I thought rightly that it is one of the most fascinating countries in the world, and it is even more fascinating today than it was then. At 78 I have still not succeeded in realising this ambition.

For this reason I once refused an invitation from him, something I much regret. Knowing I was returning from visiting my parents in Saigon in the summer of 1966, he suggested I stopped over in Teheran and spent a week at his family's villa on the Caspian Sea. I was stupidly too shy to accept. Shahen wisely changed to economics in his third year and got a first in it after four years at Cambridge. He then got a job working for UNCTAD in New York and this meant he was safe when the Iranian revolution of 1979 overwhelmed his family in Teheran. Once only we met by chance after he left for New York, in Marylebone Station in the mid-1970s, and ended up that same evening having a long and uproarious meal in a restaurant on Battersea Park Road. He certainly had wit, but did he have humour too? I think he did, and failing to understand this I lost a friend for life. He told me once, standing on a Peterhouse staircase, he would die early because all the men in his family had premature heart attacks. He was right. Just after I left Cambridge, he invited me to a solicitor's house in Highgate for tea. A maid brought in the meal on a trolley, almost the only time in my life I've experienced this upper-class phenomenon. Shahen told me my host was very left wing and a solicitor for the Communist Party. He rejoiced in such seeming anomalies. When I visited New York in the late 1990s when he was still alive, why didn't I try to see him? He would have been easy to trace. Almost the most important lesson in life is that it's the things you don't do that you regret, not on the whole those you do. Except of course if you're sitting on the edge of a Thames bridge wondering whether to jump in. I have a reason for writing that last sentence, which maybe will appear later on. But let me reassure the reader: the person on that bridge was not me.

Another friend at Cambridge, though at Trinity Hall, not Peterhouse, was Mike Kershaw. I had doubts about him, which sadly in the end were to be proved right, but not in the way I expected. He had been at Lancing College with me and was a year younger, coming up to Cambridge a year after me. We met originally as rivals in a house chess match, and quickly decided that

conversation was more important than playing chess. He resolved to study history like me. I have a horrible feeling he was following my example, which worried me as I feared he would suffer the same *ennui* that I felt. I was wrong. But the fact that he was younger, a trivial matter really, and seemed naive even compared with me, plus the fact that I'd known him before at school, left me often wondering if I could find better friends elsewhere. I felt it was a sign of maturity to form friendships at Cambridge, not simply to revive friendships made at school.

This was a mistake. In many matters I remain a fool, but I do know more about friendship than I did then. Any friend you can get is worth holding on to, unless their faults are grievously criminal. There will be times when contact is strained and even very infrequent, but it's always worth waiting patiently for better times. Luckily I did not act on my suspicions. More at Mike's initiative than mine, we went on two holidays abroad together, one to Italy in 1965 and to Greece, just before the colonels' coup, the year after. In some ways I did not wish to go. I'd have preferred a church crawl in Lincolnshire or a hike across the lake country. But I went, and gained much from doing so. For this I owed Mike Kershaw, and still do, a big thank you.

Before this, in the summer vacation of 1964, I ventured abroad alone. I was very unhappy at failing to find a companion, but in many ways it was good for me to travel by myself, and learn a little independence in the art of travelling. My plan, not a bad one, was to visit Constance and walk right around the lake, which would have meant crossing three countries: Germany, Switzerland and Austria.

I never got beyond Germany, but I did succeed in walking along most of the north German shore of Lake Constance. Crossing from Harwich to the Hook of Holland, I shared a cabin with a Greek Orthodox priest who insisted on praying most of the time, whether from fear of the sea or of me I wasn't sure. At Stuttgart I changed trains onto a curious branch line to Constance which I doubt many Englishmen have used before or since. My choice of Germany as a destination was unusual both then and now, but I think I was influenced partly by my parents' visits before the war and also, and above all, by my love of German music, particularly baroque music and the Viennese classics. Here I was lucky. Nothing was happening in Constance, but at Meersburg, across the lake, and at the abbey of Birnau nearby, there were fascinating concerts. I heard several of Beethoven's string trios for the first time, and – possibly – one of Mozart's string quintets. A minuet from Beethoven's serenade for string trio, Opus 3, has haunted me ever since. There is something special about listening to baroque – or do I mean rococo? - music in baroque (or rococo) surroundings. Attending a string quartet concert in the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London can be very dispiriting until the music starts and I can shut my eyes.

It's usually a good idea to get to know works by famous composers which are little known only because they are written for combinations of instruments that make performances difficult. Works for two pianists are a classic example, and Beethoven's string trios another. The *entrata* from Beethoven's flute serenade would make a wonderful accompaniment to a wedding, far better than Mendelssohn's wedding march, but it's a safe bet that it's never been used in this way. If I were rich enough, and there was enough space, I'd arrange for a group of young musicians to play Mozart's *Masonic Funeral Music* at my funeral.

There was also Insel Mainau, an island on the south side of the lake by Constance itself where the Swedish Bernadotte family for many years owned an estate. On it there are a wonderful series of Romanesque churches easily reachable on foot by a fit young man, or woman, in a day. It is possible that I was over-influenced in my love of them by the fact that no-one in England seemed to have heard of them, but I don't think so. I even in my vanity thought of writing to

Kenneth Clark telling him that he should have included them in his *Civilisation* series, but sanity prevailed. I recently watched again his television series on civilisation. This made me think that if I'd written to him, he would have replied. What orator can receive better praise?

There was one sliver of awkwardness in my trip. On a ferry on the Bodensee between Constance and Meersburg I got talking to a middle-aged German who asked me where I came from in England, not an easy question to answer as then I lived sometimes with my parents in Purley, sometimes with my uncle near Bath, and of course then mostly in Cambridge. I said Bath, and he remarked what a beautiful city it was, especially when seen from the air. Then he went very red and fled to the other side of the ship. A maturer young man would have followed him, shaken his hand and told him not to worry; I had not the gumption for that.

Only once in Germany did I encounter German resentment. In Cologne a conference of some kind meant I had to retreat to Deutz across the Rhine to find a hotel. The receptionist told me he resented my presence because of the British bombing of Cologne during the war. I left the following day; I resisted the temptation to ask him to find me new accommodation. I would probably have stammered very badly if I had. He was right about the fact of the bombing, but a discussion about whether it was justified would have been unproductive. I doubt if telling him how much I admired the restoration of Cologne's Romanesque churches would have helped. In many ways they remain more interesting than the cathedral. I recommend the St Pantaleon church to anyone who has the time only to see one thing in Cologne. Many English restorers could learn a lot from it.

It is July 20th 1964. I am sitting in a garden near Constance Cathedral, not far from the spot where Jan Hus was burnt to death. I know the date exactly because I am reading an article in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung about the 20th anniversary of the bomb plot to assassinate Hitler in July 1944. I can just about understand it; my German is much better than now. The writer remarks solemnly that this was a rare moment of honour for Germany in the war, and that the martyrs should be suitably commemorated. I agree; but to me, a young man of 18, the war seems an eon away. Mozart and Beethoven seem much nearer. And I do have a very slight excuse for this feeling in Constance; it was untouched by Allied bombing in the war, as its closeness to the Swiss border made it too dangerous to bomb. The allies had bombed Schaffhausen by mistake and the Swiss did not allow them to forget it. In fact I walked unhindered into Switzerland by mistake during my stay. Many people would have loved to do that during the war.

My visit to Italy in the following year was very different. For a start I travelled around with Mike Kershaw, meeting him in Rome after I had flown there from Vietnam. Then I arrived knowing far less about Italian art than I had known about German music. Indeed, despite my wanderings around the Fitzwilliam Museum and National Gallery, I knew almost nothing at all about the subject apart from the fact that Michelangelo, Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci were famous Italian painters and that one of them had painted the Mona Lisa which was not in Italy. One reason was that my parents had little interest in art. Perhaps this was a good thing: two experiences there gave me a tremendous shock which was all the better because I was completely unprepared for it. One was the Caravaggio pictures in the Capitoline Museum. Some people say that Caravaggio is a realistic painter. Sometimes, perhaps; but the picture of St Mary Magdalen there is the reverse of realistic. This led me on to the church of San Luigi dei Francesi, where even though it was very dark I was able to make out Caravaggio's extraordinary vision of St Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. I also had my first experience of bluffing my way

into seeing something I was not really allowed to see, an important skill to learn, especially in Italy.

The other surprise was seeing Raphael's School of Athens – a misleading title – in the Vatican Museum. Younger readers, if there are any, may be surprised to learn that I was able to walk in without any sort of queue and without booking. I had a vague idea, not entirely wrong, that Raphael mainly painted very unsexy madonnas. Here I learnt that this idea had grave limitations. The classical majesty of this mural bowled me over. Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, where I got told off by a priest for lying on the floor, impressed me far less. The whole design seemed dreadfully confused. I am unrepentant about this, although of course individual sections of the whole are wonderful, particularly in photographs. I also prefer Tolstoy to Dostoyevsky, and I'd bet a lot of money that for reasons I can't understand most of those who prefer Dostoyevsky to Tolstoy also prefer Michelangelo to Raphael. No doubt someone has written an essay about this, as yet unread by me.

This admiration for Raphael had an unexpected – for me – sequel. I attended a concert in the Victoria and Albert Museum a year or two later in what was referred to in the programme to my surprise as the Raphael Room. (No concerts are I think ever held there now for fear of damaging the pictures.) Imagine my surprise when I saw cartoons, obviously by Raphael, on the walls in a style recognisably his but quite unlike the School of Athens in Rome. These wonderful objects almost succeeded in attracting my attention away from the Bach Brandenburg concertos being played. I once heard Kenneth Clark hint gently that these cartoons suffer from idealising Christ and his disciples. I cannot agree. It is right for us surely to watch from time to time a great master showing how ideally we all should look. After all, the opposite is very easy to see. And of course the wonderful draughtsmanship excuses everything.

On holiday Mike Kershaw and I had constant gentle arguments, because I cared little what I ate or drank as long as I slept in a comfortable bed, whereas Mike felt exactly the opposite. I soon learnt that the best way to holiday with someone, unless they are your spouse or lover, and even sometimes if they are, is to do different things during the day and meet for an evening meal where you can discuss your different experiences. Mike also wanted to hitchhike, I think not so much through poverty but because he liked the excitement. I tagged along, but often very apprehensively, and I remember my relief when we said goodbye in Salonika in September 1966 and I took a train back to Athens staying in a luxury hotel there before flying back to England. Getting into a bath for the first time in weeks was an extraordinarily tactile experience. Arriving at the hotel I was, very politely, asked to pay before I was shown a room. I think hitching around Greece had not improved my appearance. Nor has a beard ever become me. Despite my relief when parting from Mike I missed him greatly.

Greece was more difficult to enjoy than Italy, because the toughness of the environment outside Athens, and especially in northern Greece, exacerbated my differences with Mike. When in August 1966 I travelled to Igoumenitsa by coach from Athens to meet Mike and his friends off the boat from Italy, a lot of the journey was made on dirt tracks. I understand now that the civil war was still not far away, even though then I understood very little of what I was seeing and hearing. Often angry-looking graffiti were painted on rocky mountainsides, but what were they saying? Hitchhiking was more difficult and Mike tended to get drunker than in Italy. He also fell in love with Jane, a maths undergraduate, also from Cambridge, who accompanied us for part of the time. (Later on, did she marry a rich Scots laird, or was that someone else?) I was too nervous of her even to think of falling in love. Mike was determined to reach Salonika, and when we arrived the Byzantine churches there were a revelation to me. Shamefully, I was only vaguely

aware that a considerable civilisation existed in Greece long after the collapse of Rome. The train journey on my own back to Athens, in wonderfully antique pre-war carriages, was a relief after the hitchhiking. Clucking hens accompanied me in my carriage; one of whom was I think killed en route.

We are standing miserably by a roadside a few miles from Larissa. It is extremely hot. No truck has come for hours – or it seems hours. Will we ever get to Larissa and find accommodation? Finally a van looms up. We get in. For some reason I'm in the front, to the right of the driver, and Mike and Jane in the back. The driver starts talking, often a good sign, in a curious version of French which I can just about understand. "A girl was murdered on this road recently," he says, "by a man with a sharp knife". He grins, takes out a knife concealed in his coat, and demonstrates the method of death by stroking my neck with it. Jane begins to have hysterics at the back. But he puts the knife away, and we subside into awkward chat. At Larissa, blessed Larissa, we make our excuses and leave. Memories are strange. I remember clearly the outside steps leading to our hotel room, but nothing about the room itself. Needless to say, that single, though large, room is shared very chastely.

I learnt many things from Mike. First, his overwhelming youthful enthusiasm for almost everything which often made me feel cynical and old. Then, and most importantly, his very broad intelligence which covered both the sciences and the arts in full measure. I still think his studying history was a mistake, and perhaps he agreed with me because he later decided with considerable courage to become a doctor, following unconsciously in Chris Burford's footsteps, and but for his drinking would I'm sure have become a successful consultant, very empathetic with his patients. As it was, he qualified successfully at St. Mary's Hospital and worked at Kingston Hospital for many years before a premature retirement.

While qualifying as a doctor Mike met and quite quickly married Frania Osborne, a beautiful, highly unstable and unusual girl whose father, Charles Osborne, was an Indian army officer and mother a Polish Jew who had left Poland at just the right time. Her uncle, Harold Osborne, was a considerable art historian who edited the *Oxford Companion to Art*. Frania's parents married in Bangkok just before the war. Her father fought in the war, was I believe taken prisoner by the Japanese and stayed in India afterwards living at an ashram. Frania was therefore brought up in India and at once began studying art in London on her arrival in England.

What caused Mike's premature retirement was of course drink. This worried me more and more on our holidays, as very often he had a second and even a third glass of wine where I, perhaps over carefully, felt one was enough. In Athens I had to rescue him from a nightclub where I'm sure it was drink that made him think he was in love with a hostess and try to return there after being gently ejected. Much later his marriage broke down and a sad separation from his wife ensued. Despite all this I learnt quite a bit from him even in his cups, and also, not incidentally, about alcoholism. And from this marriage a beautiful and very competent daughter emerged. Out of evil, though an unsuccessful marriage is rarely a completely unmixed evil, good surprisingly often comes. Only much later did I learn how terrible and terrifying that daughter's childhood had been.

It's about 1974. I am lunching with Mike in a very humble Indian restaurant on the Edgware Road, later shut down when mice were discovered in the kitchen. I try to show him how destructive his drinking is, threatening his marriage, his career and indeed his chance of happiness. I even tell him, cruelly, he's becoming dull; there are fewer and fewer subjects to talk about when we meet. After some minutes of this, to my surprise he does not become angry but

looks at me sadly and leaves. What he needed from me then was simple, uncritical friendship; I was too immature to give him this.

We met less and less after this. Much later, after several years of silence, he called without warning at my parents' house when sadly I was out. My mother and her sister Auntie Kate remarked how old and careworn he looked. After that, although we talked sometimes on the phone, he adamantly refused to see me. Then, in October 1993, Frania jumped into the Thames from Chelsea Bridge and drowned. Ever since I have wished I had seen more of her that year. A long time after both their deaths his daughter Anastasia phoned me, and we have been friends ever since.

My father was posted to Saigon by the Foreign Office as consul-general in 1964 and I visited my parents there during the summers of 1965 and 1966. I might have done better to remain home and read history books for my degree but I am sure my experiences in Vietnam were more valuable. To put it mildly, my father's job was stressful, but for me, carelessly dismissive as so many young men are of physical danger, the whole experience was fun. Although the Vietnam War was coming into full flood, the danger was very slight and probably greatest when we were flying inside Indo-China, as air crashes were worryingly prevalent. Only once, when we visited Hue, the old capital, and my father insisted on visiting the palatial ruins there, with mysterious men looming threateningly in the background staring at us, did I feel frightened. Almost every morning at dawn the floor in my bedroom rumbled as U.S. B-52 airplanes attacked Vietcong positions not many miles away. My father's house unusually had a tennis court in the garden, and behind it there was waste ground from which anyone could have lobbed a grenade. In fact the centre of Saigon was comparatively safe; the Tet offensive which certainly seriously affected it and many other Vietnamese cities, took place in the summer of 1968, 18 months later.

I'm travelling in a chauffeur-driven car from my parents' house at 106 Hien Vuong to the British Embassy. Suddenly there appears to be a big explosion. My father grabs me and we duck down into the space in front of our back seats. Then, gently but still suddenly, the chauffeur smiles. "Don't worry", he says, "it's just a car backfiring." We relax. None of the pedicab drivers around us seem at all alarmed.

My 21st birthday fell in August 1966 during my second visit there. In my usual shy way I wanted nothing to be made of it, but the New Zealand ambassador somehow found out about it and insisted on holding a party for me at his house. I loathed the whole idea, though I hope I was polite enough to conceal it. Suddenly we had to leave because the Vietcong were shelling a site nearby, probably a government command post. We trundled into our cars and my parents and I went home. I have often told this story, but is it true? It's an alarming fact that almost all of those there must now be dead.

Perhaps because of their tennis court, my parents' house became quite a social centre, a most unusual situation for them. General Westmoreland, the commander of all the U.S. forces in Vietnam, often turned up for a game. An aide with a walkie-talkie – these were the days before mobile phones – stood by the court in case of a call. Westmoreland's wife warned my mother that we should always let the general win as he got upset otherwise. The whole visit was a valuable education for me, as I was able to meet the most extraordinary people who otherwise would have been inaccessible to me. Two stand out: Peter Evans, the British doctor who worked at the Saigon children's hospital, paid for partly by British aid, and the B.B.C.'s Far Eastern correspondent, Anthony Lawrence. Both were gentle careful men, well worth while listening to if you had the patience to do so, which at my age I didn't always have. Buoyed up by my sessions

with Mr Burgess in London, my speech was good at that time when I was away from Cambridge, and as a result I had a long conversation with Patrick Honey, an expert on Vietnam who at that time was I think an unofficial adviser to the British Government. Possibly he was then the only Englishman apart from my father who could actually speak Vietnamese. With the self-confidence of youth, I said bluntly that the Vietnam War was wrong. It was unwinnable because the Vietnamese peasantry didn't on the whole support it, and their feelings of patriotism were in the end stronger than the admitted dislike of many of them for communism, even though many Vietnamese Catholics did really loathe the communists. Vietnamese nationalism meant that Vietnam would never let itself be dominated by either Russia or China. Was I right? I think so, but looking back now I can see that there was a lot more to be said for Professor Honey's arguments than I was prepared to admit.

My visits there taught me, in Oxenstierna's words to his son, "with what little wisdom the world is governed", and how what is prevailingly believed by many people at any particular time may be quite wrong. In the British Embassy my father, deputy to the ambassador, Gordon Etherington-Smith, disagreed with him profoundly about the Vietnam War. Etherington-Smith thought it was a necessary evil; my father was not convinced. It is not only because he was my father that I believe he was right. But that two civilised men with good university degrees and a great deal of general and specialised knowledge of the world, could disagree on such an important point was a scary revelation to me. No doubt I was naïve, but at that point I thought that those in charge of our society generally knew what they were doing and were usually right. How I could have reconciled this belief with my study of history is an interesting point. Macaulay certainly thought the same about the liberal governments in Britain in his lifetime? Was he right?

During my first trip to Vietnam, in the summer of 1965, I had to decide what to do after university, whether to stay on and do a postgraduate degree, or – bluntly – to find a job. My father was little help; he was wrapped up in his job, and in any case was not really qualified to advise me, because I was too shy to tell him how I really felt, even if I had known how I felt myself. So, in the midst of working for my finals, I took a disastrous decision; I decided to take the civil service examination to become, in the jargon of the time, an Administrative Civil Servant. Of course the root of the problem was that I had no idea of what else to do. Also, perhaps, I thought that I was more like my father than I really was.

The decision did not seem disastrous at first. In the spring I turned up at what is now the north front of the Royal Academy of Arts, to take a preliminary written exam. I have no idea what the papers contained, but I passed easily. Next there was the country house party, as it was still called, although by this time the 3-day oral examination was in a threateningly dull building in Savile Row near Piccadilly Circus, not at all a country house. Here I did well too, even though the whole exam involved a great deal of speaking, and under considerable stress, in public. The reason was a strange one. I've written that Mr Burgess's attempts to cure me of stammering failed, and this is true. But they only failed permanently. After a session with him I gained a temporary boost, which lasted a few days, and several sessions held close together gave me an even stronger boost. Mr Burgess's suggestion, to voice completely every word when you felt a stammer was coming, often worked for a few hours or even days, but never permanently. Without any planning it so happened that my sessions at Savile Row were conveniently timed after several of his sessions, so the naïve examiners observed me talking fluently, and understandably assumed I always could. Even at the final interview, where I faced alone five – I think – interviewers across an oval table, I performed well. But I can't now remember a single word I said, which shows how nervous I was. I ended up placed sixth equal in Britain. I was – in

theory – almost on the road to a permanent secretaryship, to being a future Sir Humphrey in the 1990s. Did I believe this myself? I probably did. Many stammerers, when they are young, fool themselves into believing that tomorrow, perhaps even today after lunch, they will never stammer again. Because even now there is no certain or common cure for stammering, plenty of charlatans encourage them, and the most dangerous are probably not the charlatans, but those therapists who really believe what they say and write, as I think Henry Burgess did. And Mr Burgess was a charming kind person. The most useful today are those – usually qualified speech therapists – who tell you at once that there is no certain cure but that ways to help do exist. Much later in my life I was to meet such a person, and although they were rarer then, it was my own fault that this did not occur earlier.

No one understands why certain diseases – if indeed stammering is a disease – are difficult or impossible to cure. If they did, a cure or cures would exist. I have a very variable stammer which I know puzzles speech therapists. I can often read aloud without a problem, and speak reasonably fluently with close friends when the conversation is not controversial. Recently I gave a very fluent address at a friend's funeral. But as soon as I have to confront someone, or answer questions which require exact answers with people I don't know, problems start. And I also nearly always stammer with anyone when I am asked a question which demands an unavoidable one-word answer. The roll call at school had been a problem. There are also long-term variations in the intensity of my stammer, seemingly quite unconnected with any external events or stress, which appear inexplicable. If I had explained all this to the examiners, would they still have passed me? At that time probably no. But today the answer might well be yes, as long as I hadn't stammered badly at the interview. And would that be right? Would a minister really accept a higher civil servant who talked to him – or her – with a stammer such as mine?

I then had to choose which government department to start in, and my fine performance in the examination meant I could more or less pick and choose for myself. I avoided the Foreign Office. I'd seen it from the inside, and knew I'd hate the foreign travelling involved. Besides, I wanted to get to know my own country, to which I was proud to belong and about which I felt rightly I knew very little. I'd probably already travelled far more abroad than most of the other new Assistant Principals. As I was full of idealism, I then perversely chose the new Ministry of Overseas Development, set up by the newly elected Labour government in 1964. I really thought I could do good by helping with our foreign aid programme. Barbara Castle, whom I met once only in a lift, was the new minister. The ministry's headquarters were at Eland House near Victoria Station, some way away from Whitehall. This was not a coincidence. Nor is it by chance that Eland House has long since ceased to exist.

2. ELAND HOUSE

I was called to meet Sir Andrew Cohen, the Permanent Secretary, and the civil service head of the whole ministry, for a one-to-one session in his office a few weeks after I started as an Assistant Principal in September 1966. Still a comparatively young man, he had just returned from his governorship of Uganda. He asked me whether I had any other interests outside work. I told him very daringly that I wrote poetry, which at that time was not literally true. He said dryly that he didn't think there'd be time for that in my job. When I replied, even more daringly, that Thomas Kinsella, a fine Irish poet, worked successfully in the Irish Department of Finance, his response was that such lightweight jobs didn't exist in the British civil service. He was right; he had rumbled me. Cohen died young the following year, a sad loss to his many friends and to

Britain. If he had lived, he might, in a minuscule addition to his duties, have helped me with the problems I faced three years later in 1969. He would certainly have granted me an interview and been sympathetic. He might also have been of considerable use to the British government.

Living in London was a nightmare. Normally I would have expected, possibly wrongly, to start in my parents' house in Purley which had been rented out during my father's posting to Vietnam. But this was not available for very long as my brother wanted, not unreasonably, to begin his married life there alone with his new wife. I had to find a flat, and for some reason I felt I must share one to make friends. The fact that it might be hard for me to make friends when I'd signally failed to make many at Cambridge somehow didn't occur to me, nor did the fact that all the other Assistant Principals I met in the department lived on their own in bedsits. I ended up sharing with 3 young men with whom I had absolutely nothing in common at 81 Beaufort Street in Chelsea, on the north side of Battersea Bridge. I also had no practical idea of how to live in such a situation. Probably my brain has blocked out the full horror of what happened. How did I wash my clothes? How did I cook? I have a faint memory of shyly walking the streets until I could go to bed without the embarrassment of seeing my flatmates when I arrived home. A diary I kept briefly then, between January and April 1967, shows that I attended many concerts and films, and even a few poetry readings, in some cases probably just to fill up the time. But significantly there is nothing in it about the practical details of living, or about my job. Where did I send my laundry, if anywhere? Did I bother to clean my room? Did I cook breakfast before leaving for work? How indeed did I get to work? Watching films like *Georgy Girl* and *Accident* was the closest I got to the swinging London that was supposedly all around me then, particularly in the Kings Road near which I lived. I have no idea what I looked like when I arrived at work in the morning. One thing the diary did reveal was that my recollection of feeling very lonely is not borne out by the facts; I was frequently going out with friends: Nigel Cox, Michael Kershaw and several others. Perhaps it was because the loneliness was so powerful when I was alone that I still remember it. For some years after this I had an oft repeated dream where I was walking slowly along an avenue of trees. It was dark, but with just enough light to see the path. The track went on and on, gently uphill, with no sign of an end. I knew the hill would have no top attainable by me. Anyone who knows the slow movement of Mozart's G minor string quintet may suspect how I felt. Tchaikovsky, not without form in this area, described this quintet as the best musical expression of melancholy he knew.

It is some time in the winter of 1966-67. Somehow or other my parents' house in Purley is empty – perhaps my brother and his wife are on holiday – and I nip down to it after my work: Victoria Station is conveniently near. I want to do just one thing: play a recording I possess of Bach's E major harpsichord concerto (BWV 1042) which I know is there, together with my parents' record player. I dance around their drawing room and even open the French windows into the garden despite the intense cold. Then I take out photos of my holiday with Mike and Bob Young in Greece and peruse them intently. I know I'm in a dream world – Bach and Socrates all mixed up – far from the horrible work I am doing. How can I ever get back to it? H.G.Wells's missing door in the wall has nothing on this. There is nowhere to sleep in the house. With extreme reluctance and misery, I leave at 10 p.m. to retrace my steps back to my miserable room in Beaufort Street, off the Kings Road where so many people in England apparently dream of living.

It was not a coincidence that I listened to that Bach concerto. When in Athens that summer I had strolled up to the theatre of Herodes Atticus on the slopes of the Parthenon to hear, quite by chance, a performance of that work and ever since when I hear it, I remember that idyllic summer as though it was the garden of Eden before the fall. I don't think Bach would be

particularly surprised to learn this. Much of his music does indeed depict such states, though probably he was thinking about the end of the world, not the beginning, in which he would be able to enjoy the company of both of his wives in a manner quite mysterious to anyone hidebound here on earth.

Assistant Principals in those days had to serve two probationary years in two successive departments. My first department dealt with Unesco, a branch of the United Nations based in Paris. I found it difficult to believe that anything discussed here dealt with the real world and I soon understood what my friend Shahan Abrahamian meant when he sent me a card from New York saying that all they did at the United Nations was “yap, yap, yap.” But my effective boss, Ken Law, a Chief Executive Officer, an executive not an administrative civil servant like me, was a very kind man whom I remember with affection and who I suspect covered up my many mistakes. Our representative at Unesco’s headquarters in Paris was Shirley Guiton. She was an efficient operator who got things done effectively and quickly but, it seemed to me, without anything practical actually happening. At the end of my first year I don’t think I had entirely blotted my copybook. And I am sure that my view that UNESCO achieved nothing was very unfair, though it was believed by many people in the ministry, not to speak of politicians in Parliament. One of the members of the British UNESCO committee, Richard Hoggart, wrote a book about this, *The Idea and its Servants*, after he became an assistant director general in the organisation. Like any book written by him it is worth reading today.

My second year there was disastrous. I was posted to the Malaysia-Singapore Department which had been specially set up to deal with mitigatory aid to those countries following the closure of our military dockyard in Singapore and the planned withdrawal of British troops from both countries. Here a quick alertness and an immediate response to all the rapid changes in the complex negotiations were essential. I was an abject failure. My stammer worsened greatly under the stress of the job and I kept losing important files. I performed poorly in my most important task, taking minutes of the many meetings, mainly interdepartmental, that occurred. I have always been a bad listener but a good reader, like quite a few stammerers, and listening carefully and accurately to what was said was impossible when I was worrying whether I should have to speak myself, which occasionally happened. It didn’t help that my handwriting was almost impossible even for me to read. Near the end of my allotted year there, I entered the office of John Francis, the Assistant Secretary in charge of the department, to find him absent, and face upwards on his desk found a report on me which did not recommend confirmation of my job; the final reason it gave and I think the main one was my stammer. I’ve wondered since whether he had left the note there on purpose for me to see.

There were other reasons why I should have seen why civil service work was not for me. In the end the then Labour government under Harold Wilson granted £100 million in mitigatory aid to Singapore and £50 million to Malaysia (the two countries had separated in 1965). These figures bore little relation to the very detailed prior negotiations, mainly conducted by civil servants on our side, in which we had made detailed proposals as to how the money should be spent. It seemed to me, as a very junior Assistant Principal, that a lot of what had happened was a waste of time since both the Singapore and Malaysian governments were obviously going to ignore our suggestions. I felt that their negotiators, and in particular Goh Keng Swee, the Singapore Finance Minister, were shrewder and better-informed than ours. Whether I was right about the negotiations is another matter, but the fact that I thought this, and thought it quite strongly, suggests that irrespective of my abilities I was in the wrong career.

By the summer of 1967 my parents had returned from Saigon and I was living, a little more happily, in their newly purchased house in Wimbledon. Once on – I think – my way home, I walked on to Wimbledon Common and hid in a ditch where no one could see me and mused very unhappily on my situation. When I got home I did not dare tell my parents that I would have to start again in a new career. Did my father find out through his civil service contacts? I shall never know. When one day I thought wrongly he had found out, late at night I stood on a step between the breakfast room and the kitchen for several hours frozen, unable to move and quite unable to decide what to do. In the end I tore myself away from being a statue and somehow retired to bed and even slept.

There was a comic interlude in all this. I had joined the Croydon Bach Choir, which sang in the fine parish church, now officially a minster, rebuilt by George Gilbert Scott after a disastrous fire in 1867. After a rehearsal I left my scores in the church. Next thing I knew the police were knocking on my parents' front door. They asked to see me, and their line of questioning made me realise they thought I had blown the safe and removed its contents. What these were I did not know, but the safe seemed to contain more than a church safe usually should. They quickly realised I was no burglar; the thieves had used my scores to deaden the blast. I think Bach – we were rehearsing the short mass in G minor – would have been amused by this.

It is late at night. I've missed the last train to Purley and leave the train at West Croydon station. A longish walk awaits me but I'm young and look forward to it. I swing into Purley Way and walk through one of those rare bits of England that closely resemble the suburban United States. The old Croydon airport looms up on my right, together with its air terminal much filmed in period detective stories where Hercule Poirot always finds the murderer. Then a right turn along Hillcrest Road and into one of those long mysterious suburban footpaths with the backs of large gardens on each side. Huge trees loom out in the darkness which would have scared me as a child and now simply seem deliciously mysterious. All is quiet when at 2 a.m. I reach home. My parents, just returned from Vietnam, are asleep. Would my mother have been asleep had I been a girl? I think not.

It is time at this point to burden the reader not just with my stammer but with my asthma. I had been very asthmatic in childhood and its persistence meant my lung capacity gradually diminished in my youth. I never sang again after this, or played the clarinet, because I simply could not sustain a note long enough. This is a pity. I have good sight-reading skills and my baritone voice was not a bad one. It also made me more inclined to become one of life's spectators. Later in life I did try, with moderate success, to deal with this problem and when I transferred to the Ventolin inhaler in the 1980s things improved markedly. George Maison and David Jack were just two of the inventors who made this wonderful change possible.

In 1967 after returning from Vietnam my parents moved from Purley to Wimbledon, just before that walk described above. Their house in Raymond Road was much nearer the Foreign Office where my father was now working, and they had the Common almost down the road where they loved walking. I moved in with them. I could not afford to buy a flat, even less a house; nor could I face living on my own in a bedsit or sharing a flat with non-friends. Compared with most of my friends I was spoilt, something I understood very well. Although I wasn't aware of the fact then, I think my parents felt guilty, quite unnecessarily, about my stammer and this was for them a form of expiation.

WIMBLEDON

Even so, they were extremely kind in allowing me to live with them rent free for quite some time before I bought my flat. Financially this was very useful. I used the time productively to save up for a deposit for a property purchase, which I regarded, I think rightly, as a condition of living there rent-free. I also had two strokes of luck: two of my closest friends, Chris Burford and Richard Filleul, also lived near my parents' house in Wimbledon and were frequent visitors. Wimbledon Common was only a step or so away from my parents' house in Raymond Road, and soon both alone and with friends I was tramping all over the Common and even now, 50 years later, I think I could find my way around it with little difficulty. I became accustomed to a favourite walk that took me across the common, over the Kingston bypass and through Richmond Park to Richmond station for the train ride home. Tea at Pembroke Lodge near Richmond Gate where Bertrand Russell was brought up was a common plus, as was also the wonderful views along the Thames towards Hampton Court from the top of Richmond Hill. Many have painted this; no painting I have seen so far has succeeded in capturing its charm. The gardens below the terrace at the top of the hill became a favourite place for reading. Richmond in Virginia is supposed to contain a similar view which sadly I have never seen.

My parents, like many people, had the defects of their virtues, though luckily for me their virtues were far more important. Foremost amongst them was the ability not to interfere with my life except in cases of dire emergency. Although they felt guilty about my stammer – quite wrongly, as I have said - they saw I had to work out the problems it was causing by myself. My mother still worried constantly about me but tried, usually successfully, to conceal it. My father, the only son of a coalminer, had had to solve the problems we all face in early manhood entirely by himself and I think benignly assumed I should do the same.

My mother's piano, having been transported all around the world from China to the United States and back, now lodged in their drawing room at Raymond Road. I played on it a lot when I was there, much to my mother's uncritical delight. I had not seriously practised since I was at school, and I can best explain how good – or bad – I was by writing that I could play the first two movements of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata reasonably well but that the finale, with its constant flow of C sharp minor arpeggios, and other more difficult arpeggios in related keys, totally floored me. I think with practise I might have managed it, but I was too lazy. And I love the constant repetition of things I enjoy, from chocolate to walking around parks. That wonderful writer Thomas Love Peacock's views on the boredom of repetition are not for me, much as I love *Headlong Hall*, *Gryll Grange* and his other short fictions. Plus playing any Beethoven sonata, however badly, is an excellent way to get inside this composer, as it is too with, for example, Haydn and Chopin. Mozart is quite different; the more instruments he has to compose for, the more his music increases in successful complexity and beauty so, on the whole, his compositions for solo piano are a sideline in his oeuvre. I can think of only three real exceptions; the A minor piano sonata, a rondo in the same key, and the little gigue in G major he wrote at Berlin, possibly as a response to the Bach motet he had heard at Leipzig a week or two before. I once had a dream in which this features as a variation in a set of variations that Mozart never wrote, a suitable companion to Bach's Goldberg and Beethoven's Diabelli Variations if it had existed. In this parallel universe he would have written this work in his sixties, just after the end of the Napoleon's wars, holidaying in Evesham after visiting his friend and former rival Clementi's house in the town. There would be a plaque on the wall recording both composers' stays, and a café nearby, the Café Clementi-Mozart, serving Mozart-Kucheln which – though many disagree - I suspect Mozart would have loved. How he would have laughed at the fuss Salzburg makes of him – and them - today! I fear anyone visiting Evesham confining themselves

to searching out Clementi's haunts will be disappointed. If, however, he searches out Horowitz's recordings of his much under-rated piano sonatas, he won't be.

During all this time and until the present day, attendance at concerts in London continued. In many ways I was in the best place in the world for this, and I knew it. Germany is a far more musical country than England, as I know well through my visits there, but its decentralised nature, in most ways a virtue, means that no single city can compete with London in its wealth and variety of concerts. London, quite apart from its concert halls, contains churches seemingly specially designed for every size of band from a solo violin to the largest orchestra. Many are never used for that purpose but enough were and are to satisfy me. Certain particular occasions stay with me: a wonderful Bach violin concert by a middle-aged female violinist whom I was told rarely performed because of family commitments, and another rendition of that rarely performed work, Mozart's string trio, in St. Saviour's Walton Street. I also had a strange obsession, dating from childhood, which I have never heard anyone else confess to, and which I am sure never harmed anyone. In the Philharmonia Orchestra there was an insignificant short man, not at all handsome, who played in the second violins. Like many musicians, he was transformed when he began to play, though the kind of transformation varied according to the work. Many plain women at once become beautiful when they sing. I made up a whole history for him: how he was a Jewish refugee from central Europe, how his parents had been killed in the war, and how he had an improbably beautiful wife who was hidden somewhere in the audience. I wondered how he spent his time; perhaps he sailed on the Solent: dinghies, not big sailing craft, which surely on his salary he could not afford. He also could have been a star soloist but through modesty and a dislike of hotel rooms preferred the anonymity of the second violins. (Such people do actually exist.) I knew all this was silly, but enjoyed inventing histories for him, particularly if the work being played was boring. Then one day he disappeared. Somehow I did not grieve when this happened. Perhaps I was even relieved. I have never looked for a successor.

I should have left the Ministry of Overseas Development after two years' probation, but I was allowed a third year to see if I could improve. Foolishly I stayed on for a miserable third year, working on aid for the Caribbean. Partly I did not know what else to do. But there was a slightly more honourable reason. I've always thought of myself – correctly? – as a good slogger, beavering away at unpleasant jobs that I felt should be completed by me. But of course slogging is not much use if the results are consistently poor. A brusque but thoughtful man, Roger Prideaux, with a beautiful west-country accent, was the Assistant Secretary in charge. I was of no use in the department and I think he was puzzled about what to do with me. On one occasion, trying to seem useful, I exercised my right as an administrative officer to join a team interviewing candidates for air traffic control officers in the West Indies, I think in Antigua. My presence was quite unnecessary on the board and I stammered badly whenever I spoke, intimidated by a very beautiful female candidate, who deservedly got the job.

During those three years I find to my surprise from the diary I kept for a few months in 1967 that I asked out two of my female fellow Assistant Principals, though not at the same time. The first, Gillian Linscott, was a beautiful extremely intelligent woman whose father – I think – had managed a shoe shop in Maidenhead and who had been bowled over by the whole atmosphere of Oxford University when she studied there. We went to several concerts together and she even invited me to her room in Richmond near the Park on Mount Ararat Road. I was always expecting a rejection from her which never quite came. By March 1967 she had decided the civil service was not for her and quickly got a job as a journalist in Liverpool. My memory that she had

dumped me was not actually true, though probably she would have dumped me in the end. I saw nothing of her after the summer of 1967. Later in life she got married to a fine investigative journalist, moved to the country and wrote very successful and amusing detective stories. I envy – sometimes – her residence in Herefordshire. Incidentally, she was by no means the only Assistant Principal to leave quickly after joining the ministry; perhaps the civil service's selection process was not working as efficiently as it should have done.

It is some time in the autumn of 1967. A fellow assistant principal has asked me to his Islington flat to play bridge. I hate bridge but accept: I should get to know my colleagues better and this may be a good way. From the table there's a view of a courtyard at the back, with a beautiful tree rapidly shedding its leaves. I'm bored. These people are intelligent, and nice enough to me. As Karl Popper said of New Zealanders when he lived there during the war; "there is no harm in them". But their main interest is in their careers and their future families: most are either engaged to be married or just married. If any of them are gay – not a word much in use then – they conceal this with consummate skill. Art, except perhaps the opera or the occasional art exhibition, means little to them. If they ever read poetry, they never mention it. I leave sadly. If I feel like this, how can I be in the right profession? And am I right in assuming so quickly that their lives are so circumscribed?

The other lady, Ingsay Tait, was a Scot who had studied philosophy at Edinburgh University. She had less in common with me and by October had made it clear she didn't wish to see me again. This rejection affected me far more than it should have done. Being given the push is not an uncommon experience for young men, or of course young women, but I failed to see it like that. For some years the date of my rejection, October 30th 1967, was engraved into my mind. It made me very nervous about asking anyone out, despite some encouraging signals which in retrospect I think I sometimes ignored. It also made me very apprehensive about applying for any other work. Knowing as I now do much more about what often happens to stammerers in these situations, my worries were not entirely unjustified. Having worked for as long as I could I slunk away from Eland House, the headquarters of the Ministry of Overseas Development, without a leaving party on September 26th 1969. I had spent the last few months paralysed by fear and shame, unsure what to do and lacking confidence to apply for a job. In fact I did nothing about this until I had actually left. What I did do was consume a lot of Holderlin's poetry. This is wonderful, but not good for a young man needing career advice.

One other humiliation crowned these problems. In my last year at the Ministry of Overseas Development I tried three times to take my driving test, and failed. I hated driving, and am definitely odd in that I genuinely dislike travelling in cars, but felt I should learn. I was too shy to take orthodox driving lessons and was taught entirely by my father, which was a mistake. On the last occasion I crashed the car, fortunately with very little damage to it or to anything else. No one ever believes this story, but I shall tell it just the same. I turned left much too fast on to a minor road to find a painter on the left with his stepladder obtruding on to the pavement. I swerved to the right and hit – very slowly – a car parked opposite him. An angry man rushed out of a tobacconist's only to begin laughing when he saw that (a) his car was hardly damaged and (b) I was taking my test. By then the examiner had retreated to the back seat telling me to deal with the problem. I have never taken the test again, and never regretted it until very recently, when my wife has begun to need a chauffeur.

Not all was bad during those years. I gradually became creatively obsessive – I hope and believe unnoticeably – about friends. After I restarted my diary on November 17th, 1969 – I have written one ever since – I kept for many years a tally of the number of friends I met each week. If it was

less than three I was unhappy. An elderly friend once advised me that firm friends are usually in the long term more valuable than lovers. She was right. These friends fell into three categories.

The first were those I had already made at school or university. Some – Mike Kershaw and Chris Burford – I have mentioned already. I got to know Chris Burford much better because coincidentally his parents lived very near my parents' house in Wimbledon, and there followed many walks, often late at night, around Wimbledon Common. Another friend from my school, Nigel Cox, appeared on the scene because after studying medicine at Oxford he was now continuing his studies at the London Hospital. He was a keen concert goer who explored quite a few of London's concert venues with me. Finally there was David Tuckett, also from Lancing, who now, jobless but apparently unconcerned about it, lived in his parents' house in Pinner. He was fonder of drinking than me but definitely not a drunkard like Mike Kershaw, and very much a smoker, an addiction which in the end probably killed him. Through all this he loved most 18th century music and especially Handel's operas and oratorios, and at least once a year we patronised the Handel Opera Society's October performances of operas and oratorios at Sadlers Wells. I remember the founder and conductor, Charles Farncombe, giving a memorable farewell speech before his last performance, recounting how in 1944 he sat on a tank, probably in Normandy, dreaming how after the war he would found the society. As he said, he doubted whether anyone else in the same army had the same dream.

Just as fascinating were the new friends I made, the two most important being the result of the one really constructive thing I did during those seemingly barren three years at the ministry: I began to attend the London Poetry Society on Friday evenings in Earls Court Square in a big Belgravia- style house donated to the society just before the First World War. The Friday evening recitals there were usually the highpoint of my week. My diaries show I heard many famous poets there: Auden, Spender, John Wain and my former French teacher Harry Guest were just a few among a whole multitude. I missed a trick with William Empson. He'd been queuing to leave Peking in 1951 when my father was a diplomat in the British Embassy, and my parents compelled me to lend him my bike for a Christmas show. He'd ridden it around the stage all wrapped up in brightly coloured wrapping paper. After his reading at Earls Court Square, he sipped coffee looking miserable, surrounded by fans asking him recondite questions about his poetic technique which he obviously had no wish to answer. He seemed quite immune to the attractions of several beautiful girls nearby. If I'd brushed through them and asked him: "Do you remember borrowing my bike in Peking?", I think he'd have been sufficiently interested to reminisce about Peking. But I was too shy. Maybe some of those beautiful women would have tagged along too.

The first friend I made there was Ann Whitwell, whom I've described separately in a memoir. Suffice it to say that she led me to almost all the friends I subsequently made in London. There was – for me – a momentous event in January 1970 when she introduced me to three such friends, Sam Tanner, Jim Crossland and Bryan Jobbins on the same day when we went to what they called a writers' group meeting at the house of another friend of hers called Richard Delahunty. Ann warned me that all these people were mad, which was not strictly true. I was bold enough to read some of my poems that evening, and for once did understand that a new era in my life was beginning then and there. Jim Crossland read an extract from a novel, a curious passage in which an old woman talks to herself as she walks along a beach. I was much struck by this, but nothing of what she said has remained with me.

It is some time in the late 1960s. A young man at the Poetry Society gets up to read one of his own poems. He is tall, handsome, and looks like what I think he was: a young naval officer in

civvies. It's a beautiful rhymed elegy, written as from the shore at Lee-on-Solent looking out to sea. I have never forgotten this, but can remember nothing of the man or of his poem. Did he ever write anything else? Is he still alive? Above all, how do you produce that stillness that surrounded all of us as he read his poem? Although his poem is quite different, I think Wallace Stevens's poem "The Idea of Order at Key West" might have inspired him indirectly to write this. This strange young man made me go home to reread it, a feat in itself. And I never spoke to him!

The other friend I met there was Richard Filleul, who, not entirely coincidentally, was very fond of Wallace Stevens. We began talking because by great good luck he sat next to me in the audience. He also, wonder of wonders, was living in digs less than a mile away from my parents' house in Wimbledon. We went home together on the District Line from Earls Court to Wimbledon, a journey I soon began to know very well for many years. Richard was that great rarity, a prospective and later very able solicitor who loved poetry, and could recite much of *The Waste Land* without hesitation, though his favourite Eliot poem was *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Throughout his life he wobbled gracefully between a love of poetry with its attendant instabilities and the complex prose of drafting wills and other similar documents, a skill at which he became so adept that later in life he was headhunted to work in the offices of one of Edinburgh's most eminent law companies. Falling in love with a woman who refused to leave Scotland meant that he became qualified in both English and Scottish law, not a bad pathway to becoming prosperous. After I returned to live with my parents in 1967 he often visited. Walks around Wimbledon Common were a shared delight, plus watching many films at a decaying but still miraculously surviving cinema in Raynes Park. When my parents moved to Hong Kong for two years he almost invariably came round on a Wednesday evening to watch Star Trek with me. We did a lot of pleasingly inaccurate cooking. Only once did we leave giblets in a duck.

*Richard and I are walking down the steps at Earls Court tube station after a Poetry Society meeting to wait for a Wimbledon train. In those days the service was very poor, and we have to change trains at Putney Bridge, where there's a long wait. Are we upset? Not in the slightest: we fill the minutes with rapid unceasing talk. First we discuss Thelma Blyth, a beautiful young lady sitting near us during the poetry reading whom we are both much too scared to ask out. Then we discuss T.S.Eliot: how could he combine working in a bank with writing *The Waste Land*, and could Richard do something similar? Does Richard like Edwin Muir as much as I do, and has he read *The Horseman*? How does this poem compare with Arthur C. Clarke's science fiction? Eventually we reach Wimbledon and part. The horrors of work tomorrow begin to confront me.*

Although I knew nothing about this at the time, Richard's childhood had been weird. His father had been a war hero, winning two D.S.Cs. as first mate of a corvette which destroyed more German submarines than any other ship in the Royal Navy. But he found peacetime difficult. He had constant compulsive affairs. Partly to save money he sent Richard to Kelly College in Devon, a school quite unsuitable for him because it had none of the academic teaching he obviously needed. In the end he became I think the only boy in many years from the school to gain an Oxford place, to read law at Keble College. I think he found my own parents very restful compared to his own and he almost became a surrogate member of my family. He repaid this debt, if indeed there was one, by helping considerably with my father's legal affairs and drafting a very helpful will for him. Despite all this I much regret not meeting Richard's father; he must have been an entertaining fellow at a dinner party. Richard's later residence in Edinburgh meant I saw far less of him than I would have wished.

There was one other friend I made then, oddly enough indirectly through my work. He was quite unlike most of the other fellow civil servants I met, who always, probably unfairly, seemed dully

and cynically ambitious to me, just as many of my fellow undergraduates at Cambridge had seemed. We met at a summer party given by Stephen Wentworth, a young Assistant Principal in the Ministry of Agriculture in the garden of his father's house in Raynes Park, once again conveniently near my parents' Wimbledon home. Most people wanted to stay inside playing Diplomacy, a board game which I've always found tedious. This in itself should have been warning enough that I should never make it as a civil servant. David and I, both bored, were both quickly eliminated and sat outside in the garden during a long hot summer afternoon and evening discussing our mutual pasts and interests. Luckily no one else was eliminated quickly after us. David had just joined the Foreign Office, but I could see that although he was a natural diplomat, he was not a natural Foreign Office diplomat. Here I was right; David, to his credit, survived in the Foreign Office up to his retirement, but often did not fit in well and spent a very productive part of his time seconded to the United Nations working in the Philippines dealing with refugees from Vietnam. In my opinion David was very good at his job, but it's almost a rule in life that those who are really good at something sometimes wonder whether they should be doing something else instead. He also had a graceful and very beautiful Swiss wife, Silviene, whose meals at their Chelsea flat were wonderful culinary treats. He was about to fly to Geneva to propose to her the very day after we first met. Once, lying on a window seat in Chelsea after arriving early for a meal, I was suddenly overwhelmed by a few minutes of pure happiness. Even Mozart's *Magic Flute* or Bach's cantata *Ich Freue Mich in Dir* were not as good as this! Where these moments come from I don't know, but I do have a strange affinity with window seats. Expansive window seats in the housemaster's lodgings at Second House at Lancing College and in Waterstone's bookshop in Brighton come to mind.

David's friendship was the cause of a unique experience which I shall never repeat. One evening on the phone in the late 1960s I mentioned to him that there was a poetry recital that evening at St Mary Magdalene church in Richmond but that I was too tired to go. Although he couldn't come himself, he talked me into changing my mind and I am so glad he did. The poet laureate Cecil Day Lewis was reading with his wife Jill Balcon. Never have I heard poetry read better, so it is ironical that I can't remember exactly what was read except that I *think* the recital included some or all of Wordsworth's *Lucy* poems, plus Day Lewis's own poem *On Not Saying Everything*. A recording of this exists on the internet, where it sounds quite a bit less impressive. There are several possible reasons for this. One is that Day Lewis's own presence made the whole experience weightier; his presence was even more powerful than that of his now much more famous actor son, Daniel. His beautiful wife by his side may have helped too. Another reason may have been his accent. It sounds far more aristocratic to me now than it did then, but that is because accents have changed in the last 50 years, as anyone can hear who listens quickly to successive Queen's Christmas broadcasts. Ralph Richardson's recording of Coleridge's poem *Frost at Midnight* in this respect stands up better to the passage of time.

Before I left the ministry in September 1969 I did one constructive thing which still surprises me: I visited Prague in April. Czechoslovakia, as it then was, lay behind the iron curtain, and it might seem odd to visit it before I'd seen Berlin or Vienna. But listening to Mozart has provided me with many happy hours in my life, and I knew that there was a lot of Mozart in Prague, a city which had been almost untouched during the Second World War. I was keen to see both the theatre where *Don Giovanni* was first performed and the Bertramka villa where Mozart probably stayed with the Dusek family. I'd also read Moerike's fascinating novella *Mozart on the Journey to Prague*, the only successful attempt so far known to me to catch Mozart's spirit in fiction – or even non-fiction.

There were dangers - albeit probably quite trivial dangers – in visiting Prague. In the eyes of the communist Czech secret service I was a potentially important if youthful civil servant and could well be a trainee spy. (In fact, I had been approached at Cambridge and asked if I'd like to join the security services and had said no. I think the interviewer was relieved I had refused.) Before I left a mysterious gentleman visited my office in the Ministry of Overseas Development and warned me I might be followed whilst there and gave me hints about avoiding possible entrapment. The journey there was interesting. I couldn't afford to fly, and I had to catch one train from Calais to Mainz and then join the Paris-Prague express there in the middle of the night. This was a few minutes late, and the loud complaints from German passengers about what seemed to me a trivial delay were an eye-opener. When we reached the iron curtain I think I can remember that we had to walk across it escorted by armed guards, and climb into a different Czech train. Barbed wire was visible on both sides, and more armed guards on the Czech. On our way to Prague, the train suddenly emerged from a forest past a field full of what I assumed to be Red Army tanks. Stopping at Plzen I was sold a big paper cup which I assumed to contain beer. In fact it contained sour milk.

Just before leaving I had read *Belonging*, by Willa Muir, the wife of the wonderful Orcadian poet Edwin Muir. She describes most affectingly their sad stay in Prague from 1945 to 1948 as communist rule relentlessly approached. The railway station I arrived at seemed hardly to have changed since then or indeed since the Muirs' first brief stay there in the 1920s. As Willa Muir remarked, a country where "vchod" means entrance and "vychod" exit can be initially confusing.

I'd been booked into the Hotel Merkur, a structure dating from Hapsburg times, with babushkas on every floor noting your entrance and exits and visits to the bathroom, and with a restaurant service so slow I was reduced in the evenings to sampling the delicious street food outside. I think I was followed during my stay. Once a fit burly man about my age suddenly appeared out of nowhere and pushed me out of the way of a tram I had foolishly allowed to rush toward me. Was he a tail whose worst fault would have been to get his client killed? Then later in a park at dusk I was approached by an attractive young lady who suggested going to her apartment to change so she could buy my jeans. The idea was tempting for several reasons – including the fact that western jeans were indeed in great demand – but I resisted it.

The city was an unhappy place, still reeling after the Soviet invasion of August 1968, and I felt guilty enjoying it so much, but enjoy it I did. I visited the site where Jan Palach had killed himself; he was not the only young man who did this. I saw too the St. Cyril and Methodius church, where Josef Gabcik and Jan Kubis, Heydrich's assassins, and their fellows were cornered and where some of them died. There was of course no memorial to this, as the communists downplayed any resistance to the Germans organised from Britain. There were plenty of bullet marks around Wenceslas Square, which is not a square, but I wasn't sure if they were relics of 1968 or of the Czech revolt in 1945 just preceding the German army's flight.

I did see the Bertramka, and although I had to track it down unsigned through many streets of boring apartments built since 1945, I am glad I saw it then, unsullied by the many tourists who visit it now. I also had an amazing piece of luck; I saw *Don Giovanni* performed in the same theatre where it was first performed in 1787. Near the end of Act 1, Don Giovanni himself praises "la liberta", and although the sort of liberty he favoured was probably not the sort of liberty desired in 1969, and indeed a liberty of which Mozart himself probably disapproved, the audience cheered his singing to the rafters. I learnt too, incidentally, that Mozart operas work best in the small auditoriums for which they were designed. I brought home some very cheap

Supraphon L.Ps., plus a liking for Czech poetry, albeit in translation, since to my shame I have never tried to learn Czech.

I also had one stranger experience which I have never been able to confirm, although I am sure it happened. One evening I think near the end of my visit as I was walking seemingly alone across a bridge over the river Vltava, probably not the Charles Bridge, a large convoy of escorted cars, the communist equivalent of Bentleys or Rolls-Royces, passed me by. A few motorcycle outriders – not many – accompanied them. No one approached me or tried to arrest me. I then found out the following day – did someone tell me or did I read it in a permitted newspaper? – that these had been Soviet bigwigs calling to see the Czech communist leaders for an important meeting. I never forgot the Czechs, and my connection with the country revived in a very surprising way many years later.

MARYLEBONE LIBRARY AND BEYOND

After I left the Ministry of Overseas Development in September 1969 I still had to decide what to do. I told my parents that I needed a change. I was still too ashamed to tell them the truth, that in effect I'd been sacked, but they, like many of my friends, must have guessed. Not long before this I found myself wandering along Porchester Road in Paddington and strayed into the public library there. A profound depression descended into me as I sat down randomly and looked unseeingly at a magazine. How long I sat there, unable to move, I don't know. When I left I walked up an incline towards Royal Oak tube station, not the best London tube station to relieve a depression, although curiously the trains dashing passed me towards Paddington Station cheered me up. But perhaps it was from this experience that I got the idea of becoming a librarian.

I didn't welcome the idea with any enthusiasm. What I still wanted to do was to write poetry, even bad poetry, and be left otherwise undisturbed. But even if I'd had a private income I knew I needed some other extraneous activity. It is always honourable to earn one's own bread. But, more than that, to write good poetry, even if it is outwardly extremely unworldly, even if it is the poetry of a Baudelaire or a Holderlin, you need contact with people, and preferably people unlike yourself. And so, I wrote around to most of the 33 local authorities in London asking for work. I waited with trepidation for the rejections to come flooding in. In writing to public, not university or private libraries, I took without realising it, a most important decision. I think a probably misplaced idealism made me do this, but a distaste for universities caused by my experiences at Cambridge was probably another reason. Public librarians rarely come from fashionable universities like Cambridge and often in those days hadn't been to university at all, qualifying by means of a diploma after leaving school. When I was accepted by Westminster Libraries as a library assistant, hoping to qualify further by means of a postgraduate diploma, I was entering a new world. I would meet people very unlike most of those I had met so far. Many details of the English class system would be revealed to me.

That new world was very different from that of the one friend from Lancing, Nigel Cox, who'd stayed firmly in the middle-class world he'd been borne in, while his living in the country, outside London, emphasised the difference even more. Having studied classics at Lancing, he courageously qualified as a doctor and ended up as a consultant rheumatologist at Winchester Hospital, where his involvement in a court case of national importance did him great credit. My visits to him at his house at Colden Common, south of Winchester, were a gentle shock. Food was brought home by car from a local supermarket, not bought in a local corner shop, and a large lawn opened out from his drawing room on which we played many games of croquet, a

brutal game at which I did not excel. All his friends seemed much wealthier than me, though such appearances can deceive. I began to understand that living in London was essential if I didn't drive a car.

That I was accepted by Westminster was due entirely to one person, Gordon Eynon, the officer who interviewed me. I wish I could remember something about the interview. Was I frank about my stammer, as I should have been? Probably not. In any case Gordon would have received a reference from the Ministry of Overseas Development where I suspect I was praised far more than I deserved through a misplaced guilt at having dismissed me. Yet still he hired me and I think kept a protective eye on me during my first few years there. Some years later he was cruelly and forcibly retired during a badly organised staff-cutting exercise. He and several other colleagues held a memorable leaving party which began with an organ recital in St. Augustine's church in Kilburn, a wonderful building designed by J.L. Pearson, in which I heard a late work by Mozart that originally was written for a musical clock. To my shame I didn't know it. The celebration, if that is the right word for it, ended in his beautiful Maida Vale flat. There was a clue here as to how I should lead my life. But it was not then a clue that I took up, although I did look at more Pearson churches. I strongly recommend St. Stephen's Bournemouth to anyone who gets fed up with the crowds on Bournemouth beach. Another church in Crystal Palace, the home church of the London Mozart Players, is also very much worth an inspection. Attending a concert there may give you a bizarre mixture of Gothic and baroque – or do I mean rococo? - styles.

So, on 17th November 1969 I started as a probationary library assistant at Marylebone Library, a beautiful but practical building designed in the 1930s by Sir Edwin Cooper. Cooper had designed the old Marylebone Town Hall next door just before the First World War. The ornamental arch between the two buildings bears a close inspection. My duties were very simple: filing and shelving and working on the lending counter, dealing with the borrowing and returning of books. Computers had not yet arrived in Westminster Libraries; everything was done by cards. Dealing with enquiries, except in emergencies, was strictly forbidden me. This was all an immense relief after my last job. The truth is that all I've ever wanted from paid work are boring repetitive tasks that leave my mind free to roam outside working hours without worrying about what I may or may not have done during them. And there was a bonus: Mike Kershaw and his girl-friend and future wife, Franja Osborne, lived a few steps away in a flat in Balcombe Street just beyond Dorset Square. Geography has so often helped with my friendships. I was miraculously always welcome when I popped along the road for tea or dinner. Later Mike's drinking slowly ended their marriage. But then they were happy, and I only gradually began to notice that extra bottle of wine that Mike insisted on at the end of a meal.

One odd thing happened to me during my year at Marylebone Library before library school. A colleague whose husband, she said, worked in the Foreign Office asked me back to her flat nearby to tea after work. After some preliminary chat we mysteriously ended up in their bedroom. She lay down on the bed and gave a little speech on the pleasures of sexual congress. Was she trying to seduce me? Many men would have thought so and would have instantly acted. But I wondered. Would she, shocked, have repelled me? And if not, what about the problems of an affair with a colleague? I froze gently. The moment passed. My shyness had won. I can remember her name perfectly well, but have not mentioned it because there is an infinitesimally small chance that she or her husband may read this. A check seems to reveal that no one with her husband's name ever worked as a British diplomat.

Of course, I then started to earn considerably less than in the civil service, and tried successfully not to worry about it. I'm quite sure that my parents worried about this far more than I did. In fact, up to the time of writing I have never got into debt and have rarely worried about money, although there have been times when I had to take care. I have often envied other people, but not usually for their wealth. After I bought my flat and interest rates moved up swiftly, I for a time almost lived entirely on canned soup and cheese, this when cheese was considerably cheaper than it is now. And when I retired at 60, I had to take considerable care for five years before my state pension began at 65. I didn't run, and have never run, a car, and don't habitually drink or bet, and my only traditional vice – if it is such a vice – is eating rather too often in restaurants, and in recent years rather more expensive restaurants. This vice has grown in width and weight the longer I have lived. But – and it is a big but – how many experiences are pleasanter in old age than lunching in a good restaurant with similarly retired friends, knowing that if the waiters are agreeable, you can sit over wine, coffee and conversation for as long as you like?

My comparatively happy situation at work left me free to develop my friendships and write poetry. Visits to the Poetry Society on Friday evenings were common. It was not coincidental that on the same day I started at Marylebone Library, I began a diary which I have kept ever since and which has proved a reasonably reliable check on my not very reliable memory. I wish it had been better written. A good example of its failings can be seen on my entry for June 14th, 1972 where I write: "In the evening I go up to town and meet Nigel [Cox] at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. We attend there a performance of Handel's *Alcina*: only a concert performance. Jennifer Vyvyan is marvellous as Alcina herself and James Bowman is marvellous as the male lead. There is an adequate – or if that is unfair, good – Bradamante. But how can one explain the whole effect of this marvellous opera? Its ability to express so many different aspects of the human character never ceases to amaze me."

By chance James Lees-Milne attended the same performance and wrote in his diary: "To London for *Alcina* at [sic] the Festival Hall. I don't like opera performed in a concert hall with the singers dressed in evening clothes, gaping at each other, half acting, half not. Some fine Handelian music and the best airs sung by James Bowman, counter tenor. He gets most applause. When he begins to sing, and in recitative, the voice is raucous. You think this is not to be borne. Then you get acclimatised as the saying goes. The young man has tremendous force, and his manner is nonchalant, and off-hand. Yet when he is singing he is concentrating tremendously. I found the manner rather attractive. He was criticised at Aldeburgh last week for being "self-indulgent"."

I will spare the reader an essay on why Lees-Milne writes here so much better than me, though he could have omitted "as the saying goes." And of course his diaries were edited later, I think by him, before publication. Suffice it to say that he is more specific than me, and does not reuse the same words to excess. Taking more care with my diaries would have improved my prose style generally and made me mentally more alert.

Despite what I have just written, I decided I had better try to qualify as a professional librarian, and in the spring of 1970 I was interviewed at University College in London for a place on the one-year postgraduate librarianship course starting in the autumn. This was very unlike any previous interview I'd had. The sofa on which I was sitting almost collapsed during the interview. The telephone rang too and was answered at length. I was in fact hardly interviewed at all. Despite the apparently fierce competition I was selected, and I fear my Cambridge degree may have given me an unfair advantage. I suspect too that once again the Ministry of Overseas

Development personnel officer, a kind man called Sweeney, may have given me a very favourable reference.

The course needed a lot of hard work with many essays to be written in a short time, but was not intellectually taxing. Little of what I learnt was of any use later, but this was partly my own fault. The course was the most prestigious of its kind in England, but was really designed for university librarians, even though I was determined to be a public one. There were pluses. I worked for a week at the library at Chatham House, where the Royal Institute for International Affairs was based, and met a librarian, the very efficient head librarian there, who really did indeed think that libraries would work better if no one used them. The lectures on the specialist library resources available in Britain were very useful later when I worked on public library enquiry desks. Near University College there was the New Inn on the Tottenham Court Road, where many of us congregated after lectures for a drink and a chat. And the course introduced me to a friend who was very important to me until his death in 2018.

This happened strangely and indirectly. I left some poetry manuscripts carelessly on a table in the Senate House canteen where students could lunch cheaply. A fellow student, May Buchanan, took them home to Leicester where a next-door neighbour, Alan Bates, looked at them. He liked what he saw, and the result, 5 years later in 1976, was an invitation to read at a Leicester University poetry society meeting. This benign delay was typical of Alan. Curiously although Alan was – I think – the society's secretary, he had no formal connection with the university. He was the son of a servant of Lord Hood and was 16 years older than me. His parents had refused to allow him to go to university. Perhaps indeed they could not afford it. He was gay – though the word was hardly used even in 1976 – which led to many problems with his family whom he rarely saw after the 1950s. He always said what he thought – it was not by chance that he loved reading La Rochefoucauld – and thus had few friends, and by his death I was almost the only one left. He knew France and the continent well, spoke excellent French and I think some German, loved Proust and I am sure knew more about him than almost anyone else in England. He had an immense knowledge of French literature and knew quite a lot about German literature too. And he loved my poetry, which certainly did not mean he never fiercely criticised particular poems. I fear he never forgave my lack of enthusiasm for Proust. I tried to appease him by writing a poem called *Proust His Asthma*, which he liked. I know this for a fact because Alan was never polite about such things.

Our friendship developed over the years, but at that time we met every few months in London, dined in restaurants and talked. We did not attend many concerts or plays, because – I think – talking seemed more important. He tried – or did he really try? – ineffectually once to seduce me, but once he realised I wasn't interested this never recurred. Unlike me, he liked to be posh, and I think secretly was shocked by the way I dressed. Once he decided we should have tea at the Ritz, and my lack of a tie was remedied by the doorman who found me one, and at Alan's insistence on a colour that matched my shirt.

After a few years he moved to Cambridge, a city he preferred to Leicester, and somehow without any obvious qualifications got a job teaching English to foreign students at a language school. I have reason to believe he did this very well. He was utterly unworldly and had no financial sense whatever, but he told me that the head of the school, who must have been fond of him, bought him some investments that were very useful to him after his retirement. Once to my dismay we were enjoying lunch in a restaurant opposite Emmanuel College, and a bevy of Japanese girls approached him and asked if they could join us. He agreed and the pleasure of our lunch was destroyed. Except – and it was a big except – I learnt something by watching how tactful he was

at encouraging their English by the careful way he talked with them. This was a new Alan, a less acerbic Alan, and one I'd not seen before. On another occasion an exceedingly beautiful young woman, another student, joined us for lunch, I think at the Spaghetti House in St. Martin's Lane in London; she was obviously fond of Alan and told me what a good English teacher he had been. I might have had enough courage to ask her out. But – alas – she was engaged and left soon after to join her new Italian husband in Milan.

Alan and I are lunching in Holborn. I complain about my stammer: how constricting it is, how it prevents me from leading the life I wish to lead, etc.,etc. I very rarely talk about this, and perhaps for that reason become – I am sure – boringly repetitive. Alan gives me very short shrift. He reminds me that I am in a safe job when many of my ilk aren't, that I am gifted and that self-pity is the most unattractive of virtues, especially when displayed by someone like me. He is very good at pouring cold water down my neck. There is a short silence. We both smile. The chat resumes. About Proust? About Mallarme? Or maybe Mozart. Perhaps it is then that he remarks how impresarios insist on placing Mozart concertos before Mahler symphonies when of course it should be the other way around. He knows I agree with this. Normal service is resumed. I wonder inconsequentially how many Mahler symphonies he would have heard in this way had he been compelled to.

It's possible Alan was tough on me about my stammer because he was gay. Like many people who feel persecuted he was tough on others who find life similarly tough. I've noticed this trait in myself. It's not always a fault, provided you're aware of it. And down-to-earth talking about this with no angry argument is a sure sign that you are friends.

My friendship with Alan lasted for many years and only ended with his death in 2018. His total lack of interest in worldly matters caught up with him. His boss at the language school where he worked died young and I am sure would have helped him further had he lived. He did nothing about buying a house and lived for some years in a caravan parked in a friend's garden. The property was sold and he moved into a succession of care homes provided by his local authority. He refused to make a will, which caused problems as he had quarrelled with his relatives long before whom he claimed, I think truthfully, had refused to accept his being gay. I visited him about once a month till he died. His literary remains are now stored with his nephew in Leicester and whether I shall ever be able to inspect them I don't know. He claimed to possess, with what truth I also don't know, an unpublished play or film script by John Osborne, whom he certainly knew, though probably not well. He claimed also to have taken tea with E.M.Forster. Probably the fact that he really loved my poetry was the reason I continued to see him, which is a sad thing to confess to if true. His end, dying alone and with no friends except for me, was truly sad. Always when I left him in his final years, waiting for a no. 6 bus in the flat, almost deserted landscape near Oakington, north of Cambridge, I felt both relieved and guilty. The hubbub of central Cambridge where I had to change buses for the railway station, came as a relief. But it was no more or less real than that deserted bus stop or his desolate room.

The last days of so many people are sad. I could make a list of such people I've known but won't. It is revealing that no one – as far as I know – has ever compiled an anthology of such matters, even though even famous people often have interesting deaths, and famous last words, usually apocryphal, can be entertaining. A recent very successful film was called *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. *Four Funerals and a Wedding* would not have sold so well.

It is a weekday in the late 1990s, not long after my retirement. I walk from Cambridge to Alan's flat in an old people's home in Trumpington. I pause before entering. He talks so bluntly and

candidly, I need to prepare myself for that customary douche of cold water when we meet. He is increasingly immobile, so we walk with great difficulty down the main road to the Green Man, at that time his favourite pub in a village bursting with them. We pause briefly on the way to inspect Eric Gill's war memorial. Later it is a relief to take a cab back. He insists on paying. We talk about Proust, his favourite author, and for the thousandth time I wonder if I can confess I've never read In Search of Lost Time all the way through. Mind you, he thinks Proust's faults are more interesting than his virtues. And when we hear an American couple ineffectually complaining about the food, he walks over to their table and gives them sotto voce a lesson on how to complain. Be firm, be gentle, and never ever say you're happy with the service when you aren't. Any waiter who asks Alan if he's enjoying his meal usually gets a shock. A lecture, polite but lengthy, on the exact faults and virtues of the cooking and service almost invariably follows. Why is it that this is always funny, often even to the waiter, and never tedious? And if Alan can praise, he always does.

Friends sometimes reappear like ghosts to influence my actions even when they are far away or dead. Once at Tours airport, arriving inconveniently early for my plane, I idly order an omelette at the small café. When it comes, it is superb: perfectly cooked and garnished. I ask the waitress to congratulate the cook. To my surprise, a handsome very young man appears to thank me. Then suddenly he pours out his heart: how he hates his job and wants to return to a proper job in a proper restaurant in Paris where he had attended a prestigious cookery school. My plane is called; we part. Alan's ghost was hovering over that conversation.

No other friends remain now from that University College course. For some years I kept in touch with Gwyn Bayliss, later to become the distinguished director of the Imperial War Museum library. We were both tennis fans and attended the Wimbledon championships every year, using my parents' house in Wimbledon as a jumping off point. Another friend from the course, Martin Minty, got married to a Scots girl and asked me to his wedding in the chapel of St Andrew's University. I believe any graduate of the university has the right to get married there. The wake was terrifying: compulsory whisky and even more compulsory Scottish dancing. A very attractive young woman was allotted to teach me; she failed. When the wake ended there was nowhere to eat except a decrepit Chinese restaurant. Both these friendships petered out. Christmas cards were exchanged for some years, but friendships surviving on such thin gruel need serious recharging. Who failed to do this? Probably me.

I'm walking along a footpath in Surrey sometime in the early 1970s. It's in the greensand country, probably near Holmbury St. Mary. The path almost forms a tunnel, with steep sandbanks dotted with trees on either side, much more like footpaths in Devon than Surrey. I turn a corner and there, without warning, stands a deer, staring at me, motionless, terrified. Again without warning, the deer bounds up the bank to my right and disappears. I stare amazed at this bank, which seems enormously steep, and wonder how the deer can have traversed it. I walk on thoughtfully, watching out for grass snakes.

That village, Holmbury St. Mary, occasionally became a very temporary refuge during walks when I was both happy and unhappy. G.E Street, the architect of the Law Courts in the Strand and of many other buildings, paid for it as a present for his wife when he retired there in the 1870s, though sadly she never lived to see it completed, and Street himself died soon after. So the church is comparatively new, though not much newer than most of the village, but still must have stood out like a sore thumb when completed. But – gradually – it is settling into the environment, adapting itself to the landscape, so that a time will come, if Christianity is practiced there long enough, when it will seem as old as a medieval church to its users. There is

a moral about adaptation here somewhere. And inside there are two artistic relics of the renaissance which Street also gave to the church, by Spinello Aretino and Jacopo da Sellaio. How their creators would be surprised to see them *in situ*! Sometimes, on solitary walks, I would pause there and imagine I could live there permanently, freed from the shackles and stresses of work. This remained a dream, and a dream which probably I would not have enjoyed.

PORCHESTER ROAD

After I'd finished the librarianship course – my fees had been paid by Westminster Council - I was transferred to Paddington Library in Porchester Road near Royal Oak underground station, where coincidentally I had sat so depressed a few years before. I spent three years there till 1974. I was generally more cheerful now and in most respects reconciled to my fate. There was one exception; I still foolishly believed I could obtain an administrative post senior to and paying more than the work on enquiry desks which in fact I mainly did for the rest of my career, right up to my retirement in 2005. Even more foolishly I believed I might enjoy such a job. I was turned down for several posts inside Westminster and applied for several outside, gaining in the end two interviews, one at Trowbridge and another at Shrewsbury, all without success. When I asked for feedback about this, the response was vague and anodyne to say the least. Though I don't claim to be the most competent of men, I believe my stammer was the primary cause. On the other hand, no member of the staff, and only two members of the public, ever complained about my stammer to my face. And I did gradually become very competent at enquiry desk work. Plus I shudder to think what would have happened to me had I been offered either of those posts. Returning from Shrewsbury I had to change trains at Wolverhampton. I remember my secret relief when on phoning Shrewsbury from the station there I was told I had been turned down.

Before I move on from my time at Paddington, I feel I must mention three members of staff there who helped to make my working life pleasant. First was Mr Symms; I never knew his first name. He was an understanding and cheerful head librarian who sometimes let me off early when it was quiet enough to do so, and I know kept a benevolent eye on me as he did on all his staff. He was slightly deaf because he had spent most of the war at Dover castle firing artillery shells at the German army and, more to the point, receiving them back too. Second was Gerry Blick, a most intelligent colleague who could have got a much better job elsewhere but didn't. He was an excellent chess player who once thrashed me on the tennis court. Third was Hazel Shanley, a most beautiful young woman whom, once again, I was far too shy to ask out. No 1970s film star could have been more attractive than her, but none I suspect were more unassuming and modest. All these people would have had much better life chances had they gone to a school like mine. My entrance into this non-public-school-world was beginning to teach me a little about life.

A disadvantage for many people, but an advantage for me, was that I did not work conventional office hours. Every other week I worked on a Saturday with a day off midweek, and most weeks I had an afternoon off to make up for the evening work. Not having a family was just for once a plus. I particularly loved the afternoons off. I was young enough, at any rate till my sixties, to be able to meet friends in the evening and do something on my own in the afternoon too. This might be a film; many cinemas in London showed foreign films only available on-line today, and art exhibitions were an attraction too. If I could get there on time – not often – lunchtime concerts in City churches, all the more exciting when I didn't know the programme, were tempting. But best of all was simply sitting in a London park or square - Kensington Gardens was best – reading a book. And not any book. What a teacher at Lancing College once called a good bad book was

best. Here I'm referring to thrillers. Good examples are by Eric Ambler, Desmond Bagley and Dick Francis who were all writing about that time. You knew if you started one by 2 p.m. you could probably finish it by 5 or 6. All these writers have good wiry, prose styles; they had read their Hemingway all right. In fact they were often better at Hemingway than Hemingway himself. All were shrewd observers of the world, and sifted into their plots, unlikely as they might be, were valuable comments on human life. Though Eric Ambler was a brilliant scriptwriter and wrote the scripts of at least two excellent films, *The Cruel Sea* and *A Night to Remember*, none of their books have been turned into successful films. Their prose is too good for that. Desmond Bagley's life is fascinating and he stammered too. A good biographer could make something of it. Rupert Hart-Davis's biography of High Walpole, a very different writer, instantly comes to mind. And I think Hugh Walpole, unlikely as this may sound, would have liked Bagley's thrillers.

There are of course bad good books too, though often careful reading will reveal the good greatly predominates. Thomas De Quincey comes to mind. They often suffer from convoluted, over-complicated prose styles that try, sometimes unsuccessfully, to make up for the English language's woeful absence of inflected nouns. But if you persevere, gradually you get used to their quirks and oddities and end up delightfully lost in a verbal maze where there is no obvious escape. De Quincey's account in his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* of his love affair, or rather non-love affair, with Ann is one of the most moving accounts of such matters in English. And if you want more stirring fare, try his *Recollections of Grasmere*, where his account of what happened to a Lake District family in a snowstorm is better than Wordsworth's moving poem on the same subject.

CHURCH STREET

In 1974 a big career change occurred; I was transferred from Paddington to Church Street Library, off the Edgware Road, where I was made deputy librarian, an informal promotion of sorts even though my grade was unaffected. Nothing could have been more different than Paddington; anyone who thinks that Westminster is, or rather was, an entirely posh area is very wrong. The district was full of tough working people quite unlike anything I'd encountered before. It was completely surrounded by council flats which had one virtue: they were low level, not high rise. The previous buildings had been knocked down after the war, not blitzed during the war as many people thought and still think. The area had a curious history. A book was written recently about a famous dinner party held in Lisson Grove nearby by the artist Benjamin Haydon, attended by Charles Lamb and Wordsworth. I think Lamb got into trouble for laughing too much. Nearby about eighty years later the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, W.T. Stead, bought a young girl for £5 (about £550 today) to prove that white slavery did indeed still exist in Britain, and was sent to gaol for his pains. There were times in the next few years when I wondered if such things still went on. And, as so often in London, rich and poor often lived only a street or two apart.

The library was built not long after the war in a praiseworthy effort to serve the local council house population and was in some ways an enlightened design, but there were many faults. It was airy but very warm in winter, an attraction for those who could not afford to heat their flats. But the doubtless very idealistic council architects had not thought about vandalism. Huge plate glass windows were tempting targets and louvre windows which did not shut properly were ideal for throwing bangers into the library, especially near Guy Fawkes Day. Above all the huge expanses of glass made the library unbearably hot in summer, and the summer of 1976 was a very hot summer indeed. I quickly discovered that the law concerned itself with

unacceptably cold, but not unacceptably hot temperatures. Fans for the staff were ordered, but of course arrived just as the heatwave ended.

Another problem was violence. Serious violence was rare, but the threat of it was often there under the surface, and I know I was not the only one to feel this. Petty violence was common among the children, usually among those between 10 and 16 who did not know how to behave in any formal situation and by adults who had lost the confidence, and in some cases the desire, to make them behave. The library administrators in Marylebone Library less than a mile away did not know what to do about this, and I think their main fear was of unpleasant publicity. To be fair, the law prevented them very often from doing very much. When I arrived in 1974, miscreants could be removed by force, provided it was both reasonable and necessary. By the time I did the occasional relief there in the 1990s, this was forbidden, which caused considerable problems.

I was involved directly with violence on several occasions. Once someone fired an air pistol at me, which hit a pane of glass near to an open window by which I was standing. I never knew why. Once a drunkard punched me claiming, probably correctly, that his son had been ejected from the library. One problem was that he had not been ejected by me. I suspect the reason was that he had been caught bothering other children. And once someone, for what reason I know not, dumped a load of horse manure on my desk when I was elsewhere. In fact horse manure is very much less offensive than dog manure because horses are herbivores. I did consider presenting it to the Tate Gallery as an example of “found” art. There was a craze for such things then. The children there were very parochial; many had never crossed the Marylebone Road, only a few hundred yards to the south, and going “up west” – to the West End – was to them a very big adventure, to be undertaken only at Christmas time or for special treats.

The council’s reaction to the attack on me was interesting. Probably I should have reported the matter to the local police station; an arrest would not have been difficult as the man could easily have been identified. Instead I waited for the council’s reaction. Although the deputy head librarian came to talk to me and was very sympathetic, I could tell that his main anxiety was to avoid a court case. He was terrified I might compel the police to bring charges by my actions. Nothing happened, although at least the man did not appear in the library again when I was there. And I doubt that the police at Paddington Green police station would have been interested unless I had complained very vociferously. Theirs was a huge recently built station where members of the I.R.A. were often temporarily imprisoned before their transfer elsewhere. The police had bigger fish to fry.

On another occasion I was jostled and punched quite violently as I left the library at 7 p.m. one evening. I was in a hurry, anxious – believe it or not – to fit in a game of tennis at Waterlow Park in Highgate before returning home. I did nothing. I was rightly chastised by Nova Atkinson, my boss, for this the following day. It was of course selfish of me to put a game of tennis above reporting a crime. But my conviction that nothing would come of complaining was a strong factor in what I did.

The library was on three floors: the actual library on the ground floor, the staff areas in the basement, and the reserve stock in the sub-basement. The communal staff room in the basement had an open area where it was delightful to sit in summer, but there were drawbacks. Once a young female member of staff decided to sunbathe in the one deckchair we possessed. Someone – a teenage boy? – poured tomato sauce from a surprisingly big bottle on to her bare skin from over the railings above. She was very upset. It was probably not a coincidence that she was a very attractive young lady.

The sub-basement provided more extreme experiences. Despite many efforts cockroaches proved impossible to expunge completely, and if shelving a book on the lowest shelf it was advisable to look carefully before placing a hand on the floor. At the west end of the room there was a very large pipe, probably a sewer, through which I was assured flowed a part, or perhaps all, of the Tyburn river. (It was certainly true that the Tyburn Tree gallows had been situated at the south end of the Edgware Road where it joined the Bayswater Road.) The pipe occasionally dripped ominously, and I used to worry it might one day burst. This never happened. Instead a cleaner once left a tap on in the kitchen above over the weekend, and many books in the Medical Library reserve stock were ruined. Phoning the medical librarian about this on a Monday morning when I found the mess was not an easy task, especially since it was I who had hired the cleaner.

There was a more peaceful side to the sub-basement. A well-wisher left Westminster Council a fine grand piano in her will. The council had not the faintest idea what to do with this gift, so the piano was plonked in our sub-basement simply because there was space there. People who needed to practice but had no piano were asked not very effectively to use it. Few did, but I was one of them, playing the easier movements from Bach's partitas and suites during tea and lunch breaks. Few contrasts in my life have been as extreme as walking upstairs from the classically controlled turbulence of Bach to the hurly-burly of the Children's Library. Occasionally real pianists came to practice there. Once I walked down there to find Bach's 4th Partita from the Clavier-Ubung being played far better than I could ever have done.

I can't have been considered much of a success at Church Street because I never gained promotion to a higher post and was never permanently put in charge of the library, although quite often I was de facto in charge when the head librarian, Nova Atkinson, was away. But – on the whole – it was a worthwhile experience working there and I gained a lot from it. Despite what I have written I met many interesting and good people there; working class adults were just as polite in libraries as middle-class ones, less demanding in their enquiries and on average prompter at paying fines. And of course, as must always happen, there were fascinating children. One young lad asked me if he could do his homework in the library because studying at home was impossible with a television on in every room. In the end a Roman Catholic priest – the lad came from what was in theory a Catholic family - found him a place at a much better secondary school with – I think – homework facilities.

Almost every week something happened that jolted me out of any complacency I gradually became in no danger of assuming. Two such events involved our precious plate glass windows. Once someone stole the fines box, which may have contained at the very most £15 or £20 in small change. Few things worry councils more than such pecuniary losses, however small they are, and several council officials descended on us to investigate. What angered me was that they obviously suspected the staff. The idea that someone would risk their whole career for such a sum seemed to me ludicrous. In the end the box, unpenetrated despite many vain attempts with a chisel, was thrown back into the library through a plate glass window. Doubtless the unsuccessful miscreants shouted with glee at the sound of smashing glass. On another occasion a young woman, recently released from an asylum, and who had been compelled to pay a trivial fine, returned with an axe and stove through many of our precious plate glass windows. Luckily for me it was my day off. A young library assistant very bravely seized the axe from her and detained her until a policeman arrived from Paddington Green police station. As it happened this particular assistant had been transferred here, prior to dismissal, because he had been accused, with what truth I know not, of molesting female

library assistants, though I was assured only verbally, not physically. I believe he left with a suitably improved reference. Most people are curate's eggs; he was a particularly extreme variety. No doubt some of our most successful military men resembled him. Clive of India at once comes to mind.

An elderly lady with an excellent command of English comes in and asks if we have a copy of Frederica, by Georgette Heyer. This does not surprise me – books by Georgette Heyer were very popular with elderly ladies from every class in the 1970s - but her next remark does. She tells me that the Georgian society Heyer depicts reminds her of her childhood in St. Petersburg in 1910 and that she is keen to read the book as she once saw Franz Lehar's operetta about the same person. I question her further, and she tells me she attended one of the last balls in St. Petersburg before the revolution. Do I believe her? I think I do. Her age, her very educated foreign accent, her whole demeanour, fit in very well. Of course, she may have a fertile imagination. But if not, what is she doing in a council flat in Church Street in 1975? I suggest, I assume without success, that she writes her autobiography.

Many ladies who read Georgette Heyer read romances published by Mills and Boon, and I mean no insult to this old lady to suspect she did too. I've even read one or two myself. Many are well written and it is a virtue that, like many classical tragedies, they stick to a formula. The young lady always gets to marry the usually slightly older gentleman, and always after several exciting vicissitudes along the way. Like some detective stories, they provide branches to hold onto during a personal storm. I think P.D.James, one of the best detective story writers in Britain since the war, held a similar view. In *A Taste for Death*, the detective Adam Dalgleish visits a Thames-side villa occupied by a retired (failed?) writer of such stories who is the most sympathetic character in the book, happy with her lot despite very limited resources. She is a living lesson to Dalgleish and his assistant on how to live, and therefore a lesson to us too. Perhaps if P.D.James had lived long enough she would have reappeared in a later book crowned with success, a sort of Mills and Boon version of Barbara Pym.

Staff morale was obviously important in a library such as this, and the Head Librarian there, Nova Atkinson, was very good at her job. She must have found me a difficult colleague, particularly at first, but although she quite often, and rightly, found fault with me she never, as far as I know, complained generally about my presence there. Apart from her, few staff stayed long, for obvious reasons. And gradually I underwent a strange psychological change while I was there. I accepted I would never be promoted, and tried, very slowly and at first I think unconsciously, to turn this fact into a virtue. By the time she retired, I like to think I had gained Nova Atkinson's respect. Certainly she was tolerably friendly to me at a librarians' reunion, and was very helpful to me when I wanted to work part-time.

My asthma, on the whole quiescent since early childhood, deteriorated considerably while I worked at Church Street. There were probably several reasons for this: the stress of the job and the appalling air quality along the Edgware Road a few yards away were perhaps the main ones. In those days the modern asthma inhalers either didn't exist or were little known, at least to me. The unmetered inhalant I used needed to be poured into a separate receptacle to be nebulised. This container was very fragile and broke easily, so usually I kept it at home. By the time I'd finished a 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. shift at Church Street my breathing was often very poor. Often I would struggle to the railings at the side of the Edgware Road, grasp them tightly and try to catch my breath. I would then walk along Praed Street to Paddington Station because I believed the exercise would do me good before taking the underground back to my parents' house in Wimbledon. I wonder now whether I was right: there were a lot of car exhaust fumes between

the library and Paddington station, and at weekends I got plenty of exercise on my walks. Reaching home I would at once go upstairs to my bedroom and dose myself with Brovon, the trade name of the inhalant. The relief was immediate and indescribable.

It's about 7.45 p.m. on a weekday evening. The train home terminates at Putney Bridge station – there were few through evening District Line services to Wimbledon in those days – and I have plenty of time to look at the surrounding dull Victorian buildings in the darkness before a through train from Barking arrives. There are few profound thoughts: I am thinking of my dinner. If I'm lucky – very lucky – the bell ringers at either All Saints, Fulham or St Mary's, Putney will be taking their weekly practice. The towers face each other across the Thames and their ringers have a concordat never to practice at the same time. And, yes, Putney Bridge station is in Fulham. I think of Coleridge's "poor man's only music", but know I am not that poor man. In the end, after what seems like at least half an hour, a train arrives and we trundle slowly across the Thames towards Wimbledon.

Working at Church Street Library made me think a lot about class in Britain. Many children there who were by no means stupid had absolutely no chance not just of ever attending university but of obtaining any kind of worthwhile occupation at all, particularly in a world where technical and intellectual skills were becoming more and more important. At that time both the Conservative and Labour governments were intent on increasing the number of university places, but their success paradoxically only worsened one aspect of the problem, as those who failed to obtain a place began to feel more and more abandoned as their numbers diminished. Not that their numbers are small; they still constitute about half our population. This problem exists even more powerfully today but now I rarely see the effects up close and personal, as the Americans say. I think our successive governments are slowly – very slowly – beginning to understand the nature of the problem, but have very little idea what to do about it.

In this situation my attitude towards the world in general and my stammer began to change. I began to become angry. This was a calm unvarying anger that I have never shown and I am quite sure none of my friends are aware it exists. My stammer was of course the cause. Not that people at work were rude about it; as I wrote above, there were only two occasions in my career when adult members of the public were purposely offensive, though insensitive reactions were a different matter. More and more in my lifetime many different kinds of people have, often rightly, made a fuss about their treatment in our society. They usually are part of some sort of minority, whether through race or class or some sort of handicap. The treatment of such people is on the whole quite a bit better here than in most other countries, though it is very far from being perfect. Most of these groups are listened to far more than are stammerers. How many severe stammerers are there in Parliament and in important executive positions? Perhaps it is right that many quietly consider their handicap makes them ineligible. But a hundred years ago most people in Britain and many other places thought the same about many other sorts of people in society. And why are such people listened to more now? Solely because of their number. And does virtue exist solely in numbers? Not exactly. Many will think what I have written unreasonable. Few stammerers will. That is the sadness of our society and of all societies, that different groups very often think of their own group first when considering their position in society. I cannot claim to be any better.

All this means that I lack the guilt that many whites feel about the treatment of non-white people and many other minorities in this country. I can see it is very often unjust but do not feel I am responsible for it. Is this fair? Others must judge. The problem is that there are few or no objective "others" in our society. Britain is beginning to resemble, in very slow motion, a

shipwrecked ship where the captain has just shouted: "Every man for himself." Except that it is not every person, but every group. If we are going to think of society in that way, stammerers are a very small group. And if all of us, including stammerers and including me, think in groups, including racial groups, a peaceful society is very far away, as in one sense it always has been.

It's an unusually peaceful afternoon at Church Street library. Suddenly Kenneth Harrison, the top big chief of Westminster Libraries, appears for an unannounced random inspection. I am unexpectedly in charge. He looks around very thoroughly but, quite understandably, does not stay for tea or a chat. He makes an excuse and leaves. But just before this he says: "How strange that you, a Cambridge graduate, should be working here." Or does he say that? I'm so surprised I can't remember his exact words. I at once decide never to think again about this remark and have almost succeeded.

Working at Church Street left me with a curious legacy. For years I have had a recurrent dream where I own a basement flat in Church Street, either under the library or under a shop nearby. Steps lead down to a front door and a small central hallway. To the left is one huge sitting room, with a television set I rarely use, plus a radio and a record player I use constantly. There is a huge Persian carpet and many of my favourite pictures on the walls. To the right is a small bedroom – only a single bed – a bathroom and a small kitchen diner. In my dream there are never any guests. I've not had this dream for some time, but it recurred quite frequently till fairly recently. What does it mean? I have no idea.

CROWTHORNE COURT

During this period, in my late twenties and early thirties, I began to see, not quite correctly, that I would probably never be able to get married and have children, and I began even more strongly than before to do my best to make and keep as many friends as I could to make up for this. The fact that several of my friends were in unhappy relationships and getting divorced was, in a horrible way, quite helpful. I also began to feel that, being unattached, I was in a good position to help other people and after two unsuccessful attempts, I began to read to Norman Walton, a partially – very partially – sighted lecturer at what was then Hammersmith and West London College, who had been recommended to me by the (then) Royal National Institute for the Blind.

I find it embarrassing to write about this, for fear of seeming some sort of saint, even if only a plaster one. In the Bible we are exhorted not to tell our left hand what the right hand is doing, but sometimes talking about one's own charitable actions can encourage others to copy you. A saint I certainly was not. I saw reading to Norman as a way of helping my stammer, and I think it did so, but at a price paid mainly by Norman, not by me, though how much of a price only he could say. Perhaps Norman could have obtained a reader with normal speech if he had tried, but he never did. My sessions with him also made me feel wanted. People – some people – often criticise do-gooders on this score, but the fact remains that good is usually being done. Motives are not so important.

Norman was a remarkable person. He could make out light and dark, but only in very big shapes, so he found reading impossible. Somehow he had achieved an economics degree from the London School of Economics and had ended up as a lecturer at Hammersmith and West London College. I find it impossible to imagine the travails he must have gone through to achieve this; it certainly put my stammer in perspective. He seemed to lack the anger that I successfully concealed, unless – which I doubt – he was even more successfully concealing his. Most of my duties consisted of reading out essays he had to mark, plus articles to do with

his work and the usual business correspondence a household receives. He was supremely professional. Nothing – at first – obtruded from his personal life into our work. Occasionally his daughter would answer the door, and usually his wife Greta would bring a cup of coffee to keep us going about halfway through the session. These could sometimes be very long: three hours sometimes if test papers needed to be marked. Like many blind people, Norman had an extraordinary memory. He might well interrupt me to say: “Please read out again the second sentence of the third paragraph on page 3.” He was rarely wrong about such matters.

Gradually over the years, things became more informal. The coffee occasionally became laced with brandy. On one occasion I told Norman that I’d been invited to a dance, but had no idea what to do. Norman, curiously like many blind people, was an excellent dancer. We abandoned work for a few minutes while he taught me, practising many different steps around his study which I instantly forgot afterwards.

He was also very techno-savvy in a way that was an example to me. I saw my first desktop computer on his desk. No one has ever I’m sure been better at using a pocket calculator. He was a superb almost scarily quick reader of Braille. And after reading out many economics examination scripts I think I could have passed A level economics myself and was sorely tempted to enter the exam one year just to see. Not doing so was probably a good way to keep at least one illusion alive. I learnt from him the one advantage Braille readers have: they can read in bed without getting cold hands.

A seminal event was his 60th birthday party, held at the Savoy hotel in 1990, organised as a surprise by his wife Greta, as extraordinary a person in her own way as her husband. He thought he’d just been asked for a drink at the bar, and the expression on his face when he understood – in a flash – the real situation was something to behold. Many people hate this kind of surprise; he did not. My relief at arriving safely at the Savoy was considerable. This was the most important evening of the 1990 poll tax riots. Walking there in my posh suit, a most unusual garb for me, I was spotted by rioters who, thinking wrongly I was part of the moneyed elite, began to chase me. My knowledge of the Strand’s back streets saved me, until I turned a corner to find mounted policemen who seemed to be riding quite quickly towards me. Another side alley saved me again – my knowledge of second-hand bookshops in the area was useful here – but rarely has a guest at the Savoy arrived so thankfully – and so dishevelledly.

Norman and his wife Greta had a daughter, Sarah, who was an interesting example of the foibles of genetic inheritance. It was hardly surprising that she was generally intelligent and particularly gifted at maths. More surprising was her extreme beauty. Neither of her parents was handsome; with their other qualities they did not need to be. But in their daughter – and Sarah obviously was their daughter – every physical characteristic had been softened into an extraordinary attractiveness that obviously came from them. And Sarah’s presence made me wonder about the problems of being a sighted daughter with two visually handicapped parents. I hope that one day Sarah will write about this. After Greta’s death, Norman unsurprisingly married again, and therefore quite unintentionally led me towards another friend whom I still know today.

Norman lived in Southfields, latterly in Crowthorne Court, a street not a block of flats, almost next to its station on the District Line between Putney and Wimbledon, and the R.N.I.B. had probably recommended me as a reader partly because I was still living, as mentioned before, not far away with my parents in their Wimbledon house, in Raymond Road between the station and the village, which they’d bought in 1967 on my father’s return from Vietnam. I continued living there till 1979 when I bought a flat in East Dulwich. I both loved and hated living in

Wimbledon: it was convenient to live rent-free in a beautiful big house with parents who loved me and whom I loved, and yet I felt, quite rightly, that I should have been more independent. At least I was saving to become independent, and by 1979 had enough money in the building society for a deposit for a flat. And as a local government officer with a steady job, I found that building societies liked me.

RAYMOND ROAD

It is a Saturday evening in the early 1970s. I feel frustrated, in every sense, that I'm not out enjoying myself after a hard day's work at the library. I know the only person I can blame for this is myself. I retreat upstairs to my bedroom, sit at my desk in a corner and try to write a poem. I get nowhere, so do what many poets far better than myself have done in this situation: I try to translate a poem or poems, in my case some French poems from Victor Hugo's L'Art d'Etre Grand'pere. Is my version any good? Harry Guest, my French teacher at Lancing certainly thought so later, but was he being kind? I have no idea.

My parents were very easy people to live with in their Raymond Road house. Though I know now my mother worried about me constantly, and felt quite unnecessarily guilty about my stammer, they did not interfere with my life choices, stupid as they sometimes were. There was also an atmosphere of peace in the house, both noticed and remarked on by my friends, as I describe in *Life Before 18*. Richard Filleul was often there after we met in 1968, and Mike Kershaw came too, helping with the gardening, where I was unforgivably lazy. All I ever did was cut the lawn when my father became too infirm to do so, plus cook – not very well – the occasional meal. In 1971 and 1972 my parents lived for most of each year in Hong Kong where my father was temporarily director of the Universities Centre there. I tried not to feel guilty about living in the house on my own. I was often very careless. Once arriving late one night I had forgotten my keys, and shimmied up a drainpipe through a bathroom window, which I had also left open. A little later the front doorbell rang. It was two curious police officers, responding to a 999 call from a neighbour. It was quite a business convincing them that I was legally in the house. During the first of those years, I was taking my postgraduate librarianship course and kept very strange hours, often not retiring till the early morning. After leaving Cambridge I had resolved never to take an examination again. I am quite surprised in retrospect that I had sufficient discipline to work for this diploma, which in the event I passed reasonably easily.

It is January 1972. I've just returned very late from a dinner party given by Ian Burns, a colleague of mine at Paddington Library, in Balham. It is snowing when I leave, but like most young men the cold doesn't worry me. I walk home to Wimbledon via Tooting, mostly along a much-transformed suburban Stane Street, musing on the two very beautiful young women I've met. One is Ian Burns's wife, obviously off limits. The other teaches classics at a school in Birmingham. I was too shy to ask her out, and Birmingham is a long way away. The following morning, a Sunday, I wake up to find the ground many inches deep in snow but so cold that a bright shining sun has little effect on it. After playing arias from Handel's opera Alcina on my parents' record player, I walk across Wimbledon Common, through Richmond Park with its frozen Pen Ponds and along the Thames to Kew Gardens, which is open. I feel exultant and never since have I spent a happier day. Just seeing those two women was enough, even though I knew correctly that I would never again see the Birmingham school teacher. A critic once said that Wordsworth's greatest fault – or perhaps virtue – was "seeing things in their farewell." This is an offence I've often been guilty of.

The first part of that walk, from my parents' house to Richmond, became, as advertisers would say now, my signature walk. I must have done it more than a hundred times. For an urban walk it crossed very few roads. It had great variety. First there was the slog up the hill – not much of a slog for a reasonably fit young man - to Wimbledon Common. This began as a footpath, past a junction box curiously decorated by the boys of King's College School in Wimbledon. Then you walked along Lingfield Road, containing a beautiful selection of Victorian and Edwardian houses of various sizes. Then you reached the green, not strictly part of the Common, where in the walk's early days you might meet an eccentric gentleman trying to build an electrically powered duck so like ordinary ducks that when it began to fly on Rushmere Pond they would follow it into the air. I am not sure this ever actually happened.

Then you reached the Common itself, all downhill, and often very muddy, and past Caesar's Camp which is not a camp and almost certainly has nothing to do with any Caesar. Then across the Kingston bypass, where foolishly I usually disdained the foot bridge and often risked life and limb crossing between thickly spaced fast cars. Then uphill to the Pen Ponds, where you could almost believe yourself in the park of a country house. Then – finally – a further ascent past Bertrand Russell's boyhood home at Pembroke Lodge where Gladstone once complained about being served port in a sherry glass, and finally out through a ceremonial gate on to Richmond Hill, with its view towards Hampton Court, often unseeable through the London haze. The wonderful second-hand bookshop there, a suitable reward for such a walk, has long since disappeared.

I once made a fool of myself in that bookshop. I'd recently read a book review in some newspaper where the reviewer had casually written that Rupert Hart-Davis's biography of Hugh Walpole was one of the best in the language, even though it had sold very few copies. Thinking to show off, I went in and asked for it. "Oh, we've sold out of that book; everyone's asking for it." The bookseller said. A small matter, so why do I remember this so clearly? I consoled myself by crossing the road and reading a different book in the gardens at the top of Richmond Hill. There is surely no lovelier place in England to read a book on a fine day. And, when I got round to it many years later, that biography was well worth reading.

At about this time I had two gentle contacts with the law. The first was serving on a jury at Surbiton Crown Court, where a gaggle of young men and one young woman were each being tried for actual bodily harm after a fight outside a Guildford pub. It quickly turned out that the fight was over the young woman who gave evidence, and who I strongly suspect could have prevented the whole fracas with a few well-chosen words at the right time. Was she too immature, or too evil, to do this? I hope, and strongly suspect, the former. The fact that she cried when being sentenced perhaps suggests this.

The second was when I was walking in front of a row of shops near Crystal Palace. I saw a man snatch a purse from an elderly woman who cried out in distress and anger. Unthinkingly I ran towards him, but he rushed towards a moving car and jumped in. Luckily I was able to write the license number down and phoned the police. The car was stopped and two men arrested who after many annoying delays appeared in court. I appeared as a witness and full of a curious confidence did not stammer; I think to me the experience was similar to acting in a play. At one point I complained to a barrister that he was asking two questions at once. The men were foolish enough to plead that they had sold the car for cash to an unknown man in a pub the night before the attack. The jury did not believe them.

THE SOUTH COUNTRY

During this period I also began to walk through the countryside as well as in London, rather in the fashion of Edward Thomas, although I did not read Thomas's poetry properly or his wife's or Eleanor Farjeon's memoirs till quite a bit later. I also had a steady job and lacked Thomas's financial problems, not to speak of his sadness at being married to a woman he could not love. I really began to enjoy walking like this when I realised (a) that although it was fun with friends, it could sometimes be even more satisfying walking on one's own, and (b) that I could avoid my dislike of circular walks by walking between different railway stations. My diary shows my first attempt was from Effingham Junction to Boxhill and West Humble station. This didn't take very long and I soon became more ambitious. Favourites were along the North Downs Way from Boxhill to Guildford, and, partly along Stane Street, between Pulborough and Barnham Junction, right over the top of the South Downs. There is a glorious moment on this walk when you cross the South Downs Way and realise you will be descending from now on towards the sea. There is an exposed part of Stane Street near here; the Romans did not hesitate to build right across such places in the interests of straightness. I strongly recommend S.E. Winbolt's *With a Spade on Stane Street* for a book on archaeology not entirely devoid of a curious humour which is not always conscious.

There is something strange about the South Downs: when you're on top of them, you have an enormous sense of height, much stronger than I have felt in much higher mountains such as the Alps and the Appalachians. Perhaps it's because the sea to the south and the Weald to the north are both very flat and of course low. I know Gilbert White felt this: he wrote that he had no need to go abroad to understand the thrill of being on a mountain top. And those two kinds of flatness are so different. Once I was walking from Clayton to Lewes, another favourite hike, and for some minutes was deluged by rain on my left-hand side, while the right-hand side of my face and coat stayed completely dry. On another occasion, on a much sunnier day, I saw a curious black ball twined above a fencepost. Closer inspection revealed it to be a swarm of bees. I walked past it very circumspectly. When I reached Lewes I called at the public library where a fellow librarian telephoned a local beekeeper who assured us he would deal with it.

On these walks I thought constantly and often recited poetry to myself – not always my own poetry. Sometimes if I didn't shut up quickly enough passers-by would look at me strangely. There is a theory now that some kinds of stammering are caused by an excess of dopamine in the brain, and that a very great excess causes Tourette's syndrome. Was I close to suffering this? Probably not. I did notice, as many have done before me, that walking makes many problems seem less serious, though often there is a price to be paid later as one's front door approaches.

My life was a strange amalgam of quite different kinds of experience at this time, and indeed for many years afterwards. On the one hand, work: quite tough work for me at Church Street Library, although things became a little easier in 1978, when I began to work partly at Marylebone Library where I had started back in 1969, and did a lot of quite interesting enquiry desk work there. My private life developed too, where more and more I began to depend on the new friends I had made in London, almost exclusively through meeting Ann Whitwell. Other friends tended to disappear out of London: Richard Filleul got married and moved first to Plymouth, then to Bristol and finally to Edinburgh, where he became a distinguished solicitor, profiting from the fact that he became qualified in both English and Scottish law, even becoming one of those mysterious – to English minds – writers to the signet. David Hay-Edie was inevitably posted abroad, first to Buenos Aires. Thankfully, I never lost touch entirely with such friends; a thin but tough strand of both memory and anticipation always connected me to them. Letters too were important and David's in particular provided fascinating descriptions of his life

successively in Argentina, the Philippines and Norway. But with those who remained, I easily met almost every week my obsessive target of meeting three friends a week. I rarely disturbed them with my poetry. But with three friends in particular, Jim Crossland and Sam and Jutta Tanner, two activities blossomed: walking and playing tennis. With Bryan Jobbins I just played tennis.

I have never been one for walking clubs. Admirable as they are, on my very rare outings with them I've spent too much time making polite conversation with those with whom I have little in common. Doing this may be worthwhile at a party where some exciting new friend may appear, but in a walk the distractions of the landscape or townscape are usually more important. The fault was doubtless very often mine. With friends you know, there is a delightful informality which meant that it doesn't matter if you drastically lose your way through faulty map reading, which has never been one of my strengths. Three particular walks with friends stand out. One was a lengthy trundle through the snow during which we ascended, or all but ascended, both Box Hill and Leith Hill, climbing the Leith Hill tower from which a wonderful view unwinds across the Weald towards the South Downs. Another was an ascent of Holmbury Hill, Leith Hill's fellow, from which there's an even better view. Finally, there was a memorable summer's day in 1972 when I met David Parry and Anne Marlow for the first time, invited along by Ann Whitwell, that incomparable introducer of people to one another. She was I think quite unaware she possessed this gift. This very unawareness of course increased our mutual love for her.

I found Anne Marlow, at that time a scholar at the Royal Academy art school, very attractive, but was far too shy to reveal my feelings to her. Mind you, Anne isn't a fool; she probably guessed how I felt. This was a constant problem for me, if indeed it was a problem. I think any real involvement with a woman would then have been disastrous for me. Sexual frustration was probably better for me than a real attachment. The only close friend of mine who really did become happily married was Sam Tanner. Dinner parties at his flat in Balham and then his house in Thornton Heath provided a periodic emotional anchor for me. There were other women I became fond of, but often they subsided – or ascended? – into being friends.

Sam was Jewish, so his marriage to a German woman, Jutta Tetzlaff, was a considerable event. They were both excellent cooks, but this was not why I attended their periodic dinner parties in Thornton Heath. The conversation was a much better reason. We did not always agree – their views were generally more liberal than mine - but this did not matter. Interesting guests I didn't know often appeared. There was also a curious bonus in visiting Sam's house, much less important than the visit itself but still a bonus. This was the walk home late at night to my flat after I bought it in 1979. Strolling home from Thornton Heath to east Dulwich took about one and a half to two hours and began very unpromisingly but improved greatly after I had traversed Crystal Palace Parade, a curiously ghostly place in the middle of the night with a splendid unseen view to your left. There followed a long stretch along Sydenham Hill, misleadingly named as there is no hill until near its end when the road curves to the left down a steep incline to the South Circular Road near the Horniman Museum. On either side, except where more recent blocks of flats had been built, there loomed large Victorian villas, mostly built after the Crystal Palace's arrival nearby. Many seemed impossibly romantic, and If Atkinson Grimshaw had been born in London rather than Yorkshire I feel sure he would have painted them, perhaps adding in a servant maid walking anxiously by, or a woman – always a woman! – skulking by a hedge presumably weeping for a lost love.

Tennis, an interest I inherited from my father, was a different matter. I didn't join a club, partly out of shyness but also because I thought, perhaps wrongly, that I should dislike the middle- or

upper-class atmosphere that I believed existed in them, and which I was so glad at that time to have left. (This commonly held belief may be one reason why Britain produces so few good tennis players). I began playing with my friends Sam Tanner and Jim Crossland, first on public courts near Parliament Hill in Hampstead close to Jim's flat, and later at Waterlow Park in Hampstead, which had the advantage of a useful cafe nearby in the house where Francis Bacon died from a fever after trying to preserve a chicken by stuffing it with snow. I usually won in those days; my father's coaching had not been in vain. Much later increasing weight and flabbiness meant that Jim Crossland won many more matches than me.

It's New Year's Eve 1975. I play a desperate game of tennis with Jim at Waterlow Park, a five-setter which we continue to play as darkness falls till I finally win in the fifth set. Then to his flat at 44 Parliament Hill for a wonderful bath, where afterwards we listen to Beethoven's triple concerto, a much under-rated work that should be played more often. Then to a New Year's Eve party at Sam Tanner's flat in Balham, where I meet Stella Jones for the first time, obviously through the good offices of Ann Whitwell. I carelessly drink several glasses of wine before eating and am sick. Somehow my friendship with Stella survives this humiliation.

Tennis with Jim survived for many years after this, long after he'd sold his Hampstead flat and moved to Sherfield English near Romsey and later to a flat in Bournemouth, before finally moving to France. Jim did at one point join a tennis club in Belsize Park, but when we played there we felt quite out of place. In life, if you are fortunate, there is no such thing as a single ideal day; rather there are several types of ideal days. One particular type of ideal day was often spent with Jim when he spent the night in my East Dulwich flat after he'd driven down from his house in Hampshire. He invariably rose much later than me, but after a very late breakfast we'd drive to the courts in Dulwich Park, playing there for about an hour and a half. Next, we'd always sit on the same bench in Dulwich Village, a street as well as a village, with a view of a perfect Georgian house across the road with a curiously haunting green front door. Then, blessed successive baths in my flat. *Then* a meal in one of the excellent restaurants conveniently nearby in Lordship Lane or elsewhere. Jim's acerbic chat complemented exactly his short visits.

When Jim moved from Sherfield English to Bournemouth we unconsciously tried to duplicate the same experience there. But – for me – it didn't quite work. There was no equivalent restaurant near enough to his flat, and too many hills to climb after an exhausting game. Nor was the tennis court, in a bowls club, as attractive as that in Dulwich Park. Only the invisible adjacent sea improved matters, as of course did Jim's conversation. Outside the tennis, I loved visiting Jim down there. I've always had a weakness for British seaside resorts. Usually I got off the train at Hinton Admiral station and walked from there. Crossing the narrow entrance to Christchurch harbour by ferry was always exciting. Often when I arrived we watched a film in the local multiplex – it didn't much matter which one - and then had dinner in a restaurant. Jim was generous in letting me use the flat when he was away in France. On one such occasion a bus trip to Wimborne Minster to see the minster and Kingston Lacey House revealed to me how fascinating and winding Bournemouth's gigantic suburbs are. Living there permanently did not appeal, but an anonymous bolthole to disappear into a few times a year for a short time did. The trouble is that in Bournemouth the neighbours on each side would soon wonder who this mysterious person was who left his house empty for such long periods. Or perhaps in Bournemouth they wouldn't. An anonymous life may be as possible here as in London.

I wake up on my own in Jim's flat in Bodorgan Road in Bournemouth but need to do something worthwhile before returning to London. As always, my solution is a walk. I stroll all along the front to Poole, continue along Sandbanks, an extremely prosperous spit of land between Poole

Harbour and the sea, cross over the unusual chain ferry and walk along the nudist beach to Studland. In Swanage I have a large sinful lunch before returning to Bournemouth by bus. Then the train home, but not before visiting the Russell Coates Museum conveniently near the railway station. It is my favourite art gallery in England, apart from – possibly – the Lady Lever Art Gallery in Port Sunlight. But that gallery has no view of the sea, and does not contain my favourite sentimental picture, “Always Welcome”, by Laura Alma-Tadema. Except, of course, that the picture is not really sentimental at all, but brutally realistic. Dying mothers will always want their children at their bedside as long as they believe themselves to be presentable.

HARVARD ROAD

My friendship with Stella did indeed survive, but not through walking. We have met often ever since, and Stella is one of those reliable friends who always turns up on time, never complains overmuch about her life and is invariably sympathetic to others’ problems. When she does complain, she has the gift of making her complaints interesting, not boring. The older I get, the more I realise that reliability, combined of course with sensitivity and a suitable lack of dullness, is almost the most exciting of qualities. It ought to be exciting when someone arrives correctly at a rendezvous and everything clicks harmoniously into place. As G.K.Chesterton almost said, Sloane Square succeeding Victoria when you travel westwards on the Circle Line should be a memorable event.

Two memories of Stella stand out amongst many I could have picked. One is a performance of Ibsen’s *Lady from the Sea* starring Vanessa Redgrave which I attended with her at the Roundhouse in Camden Town in 1979. This was a strange experience. I am not a particular lover of Ibsen’s plays; his long lead-ins to their inevitable problem plots irritate me, and their “solutions” even more. The banging door at the end of *A Doll’s House* is no substitute for proper witty dialogue. I’d rather watch raucous Victorian melodramas such as *The Colleen Bawn*, sadly rarely acted today. I think Somerset Maugham does this sort of thing much better. Nor do I particularly like Vanessa Redgrave as an actress, a heretical opinion which I won’t waste time trying to justify. But on that evening everything fell into place, including Stella’s presence beside me. Vanessa Redgrave was certainly on top form. And of course Stella is I think more of an Ibsen fan than I am. You can certainly enjoy a play, and many other things, vicariously if you have the right companion. A child is often helpful, but not necessary. And Stella was far from being a child. Plus I think that Vanessa Redgrave is a better actress on the stage than in films.

It is Alfred Brendel’s farewell recital in London. The Royal Festival Hall is packed. It is quite an unusual programme, containing – if I remember rightly – Mozart’s late F major piano sonata, K. 533. A little girl sits in front of me with an elderly man who gradually emerges as her grandfather. “This is a very big hall,” she says, “much bigger than my school hall.” I shudder: she has a loud piercing voice. Memories of Elizabeth Bott in the Just William stories rise up inside me. But during the concert she sits bolt upright, vigorously attending to every note, and is scrupulously silent throughout. At the end she remarks, with several rows listening in: “You know grandfather, Mr Brendel can play a lot better than my piano teacher.” Perhaps she really does appreciate the wonderful coda at the end of the Mozart sonata. This is a rare occasion where we know Mozart changed his mind about a composition. And he would have put that little girl into an opera had he been given the chance.

The other memory is of course of Stella's wedding, to Richard Leigh, a scarily intelligent copy editor of mathematics books. It was – dare I write the word again? – vicariously enjoyable seeing her so happy. I played a very minor role in introducing them to each other, which was satisfying. The marriage ceremony was in a Quaker meeting house, which was interesting. I shall never know whether the long silence that occurred before the ceremony started was really a stressful time of mutual contemplation, or whether it had been carefully rehearsed just to tantalise all of us. No doubt in reality it was an integral part of the ceremony.

Throughout my life Quaker friends have stood on the sidelines, carefully refraining from asking me to join their Society. I do often lunch at their London headquarters in the Euston Road, but that is as far as I have gone. I have this heretical belief that formal societies always bring out the evil in people just as much as organised religion can. This does not seem to be true with the Quakers. Or is it the case that they bring out the evil in me?

Before and for a short time after her marriage, Stella lived in Harvard Road in Chiswick, and I attended many parties there, particularly in the summer when sitting in the garden was possible. Somehow the noise from the nearby A4 road never disturbed me. It was because of Stella, but not I think at her flat that I first met JoAnn, a primary school teacher from New York, with whom I corresponded for many years, twice staying in her Astoria house in Queens. Her death in 2021 upset me greatly. I also probably met Cheryl Broughton there, a lady who did not change my life but in a mysterious way glowed into it.

She made me think again about friendship. She had multiple sclerosis. She was confined to a wheelchair when I first knew her, and her gradual decline until she died is without question the most horrifying thing I have seen in my life – so far. How her parents and husband bore this – she got married whilst I knew her – is beyond me. I used to visit her about once a fortnight in her flat at Frazer Street in Chiswick and we usually played *Trivial Pursuit* or watched *Countdown* on the television. Her presence helped me in various ways. My worries about my job and speech problems seemed ridiculously trivial when compared with her situation. Her flat turned into a curious source of stability in a world where I was incessantly rushing around from work to my flat and then often onward to my parents' house, who by that time were needing more and more help. This peace and stability were of course paid for by her; I cannot know what anger and grief she repressed during these visits. Once she fell out of bed whilst alone. In despair she dialled 999, and some firemen – the fire station was only a minute away down the road – arrived and put her back to bed. When she apologised for the trouble she had caused, one of them said: "Which do you think I prefer, fighting a real fire, or putting a beautiful young woman like you back to bed?" Was this answer overly sentimental? Firemen on the whole aren't. When she died, her funeral was very definitely not a celebration of a life happily lived and properly ended at the right time. Rather it was a celebration of courage: not the courage of the battlefield, but the equal courage of battling day after day to live a semblance of a normal life. People like Cheryl often worry about their enforced dependence on others. They often underestimate the strength of their example to others. It is not coincidental that there is no self-pity in the essays of Charles Lamb, who knew more about courage outside the battlefield than most people. Lamb makes an all too brief appearance in Wordsworth's wonderfully misleadingly titled poem *Extempore Effusion Upon the Death of James Hogg* where he is called, equally misleadingly, "the frolic and the gentle". There was a lot more to Lamb than this, although of course he was intermittently very frolicsome. Wordsworth's brief reference to Lamb's "lonely hearth" in the poem is a hint he understood this. This tiny hint is more powerful than many long poems.

Throughout the 1970s I travelled to Europe at least once a year, and sometimes twice. On the whole I disliked travelling alone, but could never find a friend who wanted my kind of holiday. The days passed by all right; it was dinner in the evening on my own when I felt lonely. All those girls – and none for me. I once found myself obsessively counting 52 passing me on a bridge over the Arno, and many apparently single too. It was especially irksome passing very near Ann Whitwell's room when I left Victoria – I could almost see her window from the train – and know that she wouldn't be accompanying me. This was not because I loved her in the conventional sense; I simply wanted her as an entertaining companion. For the most part I saw the usual sights of a traveller in Europe, with the big advantage that booking was in those days almost always unnecessary; you could walk straight into the Uffizi Gallery in Florence or the Arena Chapel in Padua at most times during Italian office hours. I waited, perhaps wisely, before visiting Venice in 1976, and liked best a concert where Beethoven piano trios were played, and a wonderful sculpture by Canova of Daedalus and Icarus in the Museo Correr. What I would have liked best would have been Vivaldi concertos, preferably from his *L'Estro Armonico*, played from a barge on the Grand Canal. This never happened. On two later visits I fell in love with Bellini's paintings, and began to understand that the best way to see them is in their original church settings. Looking at them in the National Gallery, which I much recommend, is not quite the same thing.

What did happen in Venice was an earthquake, which began on May 6th 1976 while I was watching a film, though which film I can't remember. Everyone rushed outside; I was amongst the last to exit; it took me a shamefully long time to understand what the excited shouts of "terremoto" meant. On a nearby canal the water was uneasily chopping up and down, and some plaster – not too much – was stripping itself off a nearby wall. There was much anxiety, whose significance I was slow to understand, as to where the epicentre was. If it had been in the Adriatic, disaster might have struck in the form of a tsunami. In fact the epicentre, with a magnitude of 6.5 on the Richter scale, was away to the north, in Friuli, where almost a thousand people were killed. Many people camped out all night. I returned to my hotel and slept through at least two minor aftershocks. I wasn't brave, just ignorant of what might have happened. It never occurred to me to telegraph my parents to tell them I was safe. Luckily the earthquake was not well reported in England, and when it was, Friuli, not Venice, was mentioned.

Another visit, to the Netherlands, was memorable for different reasons. The hotel I found in Amsterdam was suspiciously cheap, and I found out why when I went to bed. Anyone who has seen the film *Genevieve* will guess what happened next. A church clock, striking the hours and quarters, must have been about as far away from my bed as the landing outside. I slept no more. Breakfast in the morning accompanied by a multitude of prostitutes on adjacent tables – there was a brothel on the next floor – came as a relief.

Another short trip from Amsterdam showed me how important buildings are to concerts. On a very cold evening – it was March, I think – I took a bus a few miles out of the city along a dyke to a small village where Bach's *St Matthew Passion* was being performed. Everything was perfect: the church was exactly the right size, almost as big as the village, and the performance itself, by a mixture of village amateurs and a few professionals from Amsterdam, was movingly adequate. Some sort of Irish coffee in the interval certainly helped with the intense cold. The bleak view across the dark flatness beyond somehow helped me feel satisfyingly sombre. It was late before I got to bed – in I think a different hotel.

Not long after this I visited Italy's northwest coast, and in particular Genoa and Pisa. Visiting Shelley's last residence, a boathouse with dwelling rooms above along the coast from La

Spezia, was bleak in a different way. A museum to Shelley existed on the converted ground floor, but it contained little of interest and was obviously on its last legs as interest in Shelley was decreasing then and, except in some American universities, is still decreasing. I could see why Mary Shelley hated the place and why Shelley, always instinctively a solitary person, loved it. I could at last – I think – understand how he could write those lyrical droplets to Jane Williams and that frightening torso *The Triumph of Life* at the same time.

All this time, indeed for the rest of my life, I was writing poetry, perhaps more often abroad than at home, and at the beginning of this long period, in the early 1970s, I often read poems aloud when I met with friends at what we called, with startling unoriginality, “the writers’ group”. They seemed to be liked, though whether this was mere politeness I still don’t know. I used to think I had no success in submitting poems for publication, but a little recent research proves this is not quite true. Norman Jeffares, the Irish poet and scholar, accepted a few really quite poor poems for his Canadian magazine *Ariel*. Peter Jay, a schoolfellow from my Lancing days, accepted some for the last issue of his journal *New Measure*; he later became a distinguished poetry publisher, one of the most important in Britain. I even won a small prize at the Hastings poetry festival and the *Poetry Review* printed a poem about a man, not very unlike me, sitting on a park bench. There were other small acceptances amid many refusals. But when I wrote to Peter, suggesting he published a booklet of my poetry, he quite rightly pointed out that I needed to have many more poems published in magazines before he could even begin considering such a thing.

At this point I gave up. This was not modesty, but vanity. I was too proud to put myself through the wringer of many rejections, even though many much better writers than I have done so. I wanted almost instant acceptance or nothing. If the reader thinks I sound bitter, he may be right. If he thinks I am bitter, he is wrong. I’m vain enough to believe that one’s worth as a poet has no necessary connection with any initial success. Plenty of past examples illustrate this truth.

During that time, and later in life than many, I became fascinated by Shelley’s poetry. I’d only read the short lyrics at school and university, and fine as they are – and a few are very fine – they are nothing compared to long poems such as *The Witch of Atlas* or *Julian and Maddalo*. Almost no one I’ve ever met, including some poetically quite learned people, knows these poems at all well or the wonder of them. *Julian and Maddalo* is undoubtedly the *fons et origo* of all of Browning’s conversational poems, and even an influence on symbolist poems such as Browning’s *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*. Once someone said to me, astonished by the power and grace of the last movement of Mozart’s *Jupiter* symphony, that no literary equivalent exists in Western art. He was wrong; the 4th act of *Prometheus Unbound* is that equivalent, although Mozart is hinting, and more than hinting, at something he is sure exists, while Shelley is describing a world he would desperately like to exist. There is also a curious musical equivalent to the strident self-pity found in much of Shelley’s less classical poetry: the arias of anger in Handel’s operas, an anger missing in most subsequent operas because painful, piercing self-obsessed anger is hard to express romantically. The duet *se m’ascolti* in Handel’s opera *Sosarme* is a wonderful example of this. Often at this time I would set out on a walk with Shelley’s poetry in my pocket and a Handel aria in my head.

I’m listening to Don Giovanni at the Coliseum in 1967; it is the first opera performed there by the English National Opera in its new theatre. I’ve just heard “La Ci Darem La Mano”, a duet between the Don and Despina known all over the Western and Sinophile worlds in many arrangements. Next comes what turns out to be my mother’s favourite aria in the opera, “Ah! Fuggi, Il Traditor!”.

am amazed; here, not coincidentally, is all that Handelian anger transposed perfectly into a classical context. The aria is rarely performed as a concert piece because it is so short. Is it a homage to Handel? Is Mozart saying to Handel: what you can do, I can do better? We'll never know. What is certain is that the aria slots perfectly into Mozart's and his librettist da Ponte's plan for the opera. If I think that only Handel can compose arias full of pure anger, and righteous anger at that, I am wrong. But there aren't many exceptions.

Revealingly I wrote above that I was listening to *Don Giovanni*, and not watching it. The visual side of opera has always bored me, and the strange productions fashionable now, especially on the continent, continually pass me by. It's not that I prefer concert performances. I love the feeling of space and excitement that you get from a stage. Norman Walton, a friend of mine mentioned above who was blind, was a great opera fan, and when he told me he loved attending operas even though he could see nothing, I understood.

One short passage in Shelley's oeuvre has haunted me all my life, but oddly it is not an original poem but a translation of a short extract from Dante's *Il Purgatorio*, conventionally known as *Matilda Gathering Flowers*. This is where Dante finds Matilda, the lady who will lead him to Beatrice, his real love. Not by chance, they meet at a stream, which Dante must cross in order to ascend into heaven. Also not by chance, the meeting occurs exactly half way through both *Il Purgatorio* and the *Divina Commedia* itself. In the end, we all need the help of others, not a lesson which a naturally solitary person like me has found it easy to learn. Occasionally, on my tramps through Surrey and Sussex, passers-by must have found my chanting extremely odd as they approached me. Once a fierce Alsatian dog had to be restrained with difficulty by its owner when my singing on the North Downs Way almost drove it mad.

Of course, I did not always chant. Certain places on these walks became favourites of mine where I could stop and picnic, or maybe just stop and look. One was Jack and Jill, two windmills south of Hassocks where the path from the station rises up onto the South Downs and turns east on its way to Lewes. Another was north of Shere on the North Downs Way where there is a tiny grass plateau from which a wonderful view exists east towards Dorking, with the parish church's spire very prominent, and westwards towards Albury and Chilworth. If you walked towards Guildford there was a reward at the end: one of the biggest and best second-hand bookshops in England, now sadly long disappeared.

I'm walking up Blackdown to the south of Haslemere. When I reach Tennyson's walk – he retreated there when too many visitors spoilt his house in the Isle of Wight - vast views open out both to the east towards Gatwick Airport and also further south. Later on I reach a bench I've often sat on right at the end of the down where you can see southwards directly towards the sea. Infuriatingly a courting couple have got there first. I slouch nearby, I hope unseen and unheard. Clouds intermittently cross the sun. Far below I can see an old farmhouse; it is revealing that a swimming pool, not cows, lies next door. Sometimes, when I can't sleep, I imagine sitting on that bench overnight in the hot summertime and awaiting the dawn.

Walking around London was important too, in a way that is more fashionable now than it was then. If I wanted to see a film in a cinema in Camden Town, now long defunct, and was working at Marylebone Library, I'd usually walk across Regents Park to get there. When I was working at Queens Park Library in the mid-1990s and often visiting my widowed mother in Wimbledon, I'd take a 93 bus to Putney Bridge and then walk across Putney Heath and Wimbledon Common to her house in Raymond Road. When I worked at Victoria Library for 10 years before my retirement in 2005, I often used to walk across the Thames at Chelsea Bridge to David Parry's

flat in Liston Road just off Clapham Common. And walking sharply downhill to Regents Park from friends in Hampstead was a lot more fun than catching an underground train from Hampstead tube station, particularly as you had the reward of the flatness of Regents Park at the bottom of the hill.

It's a few weeks after the autumn solstice and I'm strolling across Chelsea Bridge towards Clapham for dinner with David Parry. A wonderful sunset is in progress westwards along the Thames. I lean over the railings and breathe it all in. Whistler might have painted this, although he never I think painted from a bridge and preferred gloomier scenes. Suddenly I turn around. Two police officers of different sexes are looking at me anxiously. The policewoman walks gently up to me and says: "Are you all right, sir?" I reassure her. Ironically, very ironically, some years later Mike Kershaw's wife Frania jumped into the Thames either from or near this bridge. Her body ended up at Canary Wharf.

Frانيا's suicide occurred in October 1993. Her divorce from Mike, caused I think mainly by his drunkenness but partly by her periodic bouts of insanity, had happened some years earlier. Although she had just quarrelled with her sister, I think its main cause may have been fear of living on her own after her children had left for university. It was a truly terrible shock to Mike and their children but a dreadful shock to me too. Usually it was she who phoned me; if she was upset I like to think our chats helped her, as I am sure her conversations with other friends did too. But that spring my father had died. I was much taken up with caring for my mother, and for a time other matters were swept from my mind. Would a timely phone call have helped her? I shall never know. It seems improbable, but a combination of guilt and egotism makes me wonder.

Soon friends joined me on these walks, and I made a surprising discovery hinted at above: walking with companions is a quite different experience and can be very worthwhile if they really are friends and you aren't in a club. It is less excitingly extreme than walking solo but sometimes more fun. You see far less of the countryside and talking while walking is always, for me, an unsatisfactory experience. But there are worthwhile compensations. There is the pause for lunch. And, best of all, there's the gentle climax of tea at the end. And always, returning home on a Sunday evening, for most walks with friends were on Sundays, there was the melancholy of anticipating approaching work the following day. Not the least advantage of retirement is the pleasure of avoiding this.

RYEDALE

In the midst of all this I finally bought a flat. The address was 19a Ryedale, in East Dulwich in what was then a very unfashionable area: this was the flat that I was walking to after attending Sam Tanner's parties. In fact, not long after my purchase someone asked me at a party if I was the first person to move there, a revealing comment on the English class system. I found the process of first searching for a property and then buying it very stressful. I often felt that a partner would have been useful, except of course that she might have wanted to buy quite a different flat. Throughout the whole business my stammer was very bad, and when I rang from a phone box near Oxford Circus to make what turned out to be a decisive offer I overheard an estate agent warning his colleague how irksome the conversation would be. The flat was cheap because it was far from a railway station, but the poor transport links did not worry a reasonably fit young man like me.

I was an incredibly naïve purchaser and in retrospect I'm amazed that the Leek and Westbourne Building Society, as it then was, gave me a loan. I was able to put down a deposit of £4,000, saved while I was living at my parents, quite a bit less than a third of the £15,750 selling price, and I suppose my local government job - I'd been a library assistant and librarian now for over 10 years - must have helped. But I depended entirely upon a building society survey and it did not penetrate into my brain that I was buying a lease of 93 years and not a freehold until after the purchase. It was pure chance that the flat had two bedrooms, so that from the beginning I could put up guests. I found like many people that someone with a spare room in London, even if it's some way from the centre, is bound to have visitors, even if - and this rarely happened - they were only on their way to Gatwick Airport. The flat was also exceedingly short of storage space, something my mother at once pointed out the first time she saw it.

The flat did have two other advantages: the view and, despite what I have just written, its situation. The view was in theory of a graveyard - Lambeth Old Cemetery - but no graves were to be seen and a field and trees behind it comprised the view. (In fact I only obtained the flat because an earlier offer was withdrawn after the prospective purchaser's wife said she disliked living next to a graveyard.) Peckham Rye Park was five minutes' walk away, where - probably - William Blake had seen visions of angels in the late 18th century. Up the hill - One Tree Hill - was a second park, where there were superb views across London to the northwest and where duels had supposedly once been fought. It was even claimed that Queen Elizabeth I had been taken there to see the view. This I doubt.

About a mile away, too, was Dulwich Park, behind which lay the Dulwich picture gallery. In those days almost no one seemed to visit it, particularly on the weekdays which every other week I took off to make up for my Saturday working. This was - I think - the first purpose-built gallery in the world and it was an education in art to visit it. I have been very lucky in that both in Cambridge and Dulwich wonderful galleries lay nearby quite unknown to me at first. The most famous painting in Dulwich is rightly Rembrandt's *Girl at a Window* but my favourites were three, a painting by Claude of *Jacob and Laban with his Daughters*, Poussin's *Roman Road* and Watteau's *Les Plaisirs du Bal*. In 1979 when I first began seriously to visit the gallery Poussin's painting was merely attributed to him, despite my polite protests to the staff that he really must have painted it himself. Later this was corrected. I like to think I was the cause of this.

I did almost nothing to the flat for a very long time. It was on the first and second floors of a converted Victorian house and the staircase up to the flat remained an almost interminable mess. There was no central heating; instead there was an antique gas fire downstairs and some curious electric storage heaters upstairs and on the staircase. These were in fact more efficient than the conventional gas central heating I was compelled to install much later. The water was heated, at first very efficiently, by an old-fashioned geyser which in the end malfunctioned dangerously and was condemned by the Gas Board. A very attractive young woman from the Board came along and advised me how to install a new one, which was less efficient but doubtless safer. One of the walls in the drawing room was a terrible mess of chipped and broken plaster and it was a very long time before I had it redecorated, remorselessly encouraged by Valerie after we'd met, and she'd undergone the appalling shock of a first visit to my flat. I only redecorated one room myself, the main bedroom on the second floor, where I painted over some wilting wallpaper with to say the least very mixed results. None of this worried me, and if it disturbed my guests they never said. Of course, a terrible mess in a friend's house can be endearing though unbearable at home. As someone - Kingsley Amis? - once wrote, drinks taste better in a friend's house because you haven't paid for them.

Although my first visitor was Stella Leigh, my most frequent visitor for quite a few years was David Parry, whom I'd met on a historic walk to Box Hill in 1972. This was partly chance, as he lived not too far away in Clapham, close to Grafton Square which looks – almost - like a piece of Belgravia transported by magic to the suburbs. David was 14 years older than me but his manner was so youthful that I never felt this. He had materially come down in the world. His parents had owned a brewing company in Halesworth in Suffolk which sadly ceased to exist when the industry was reorganised in the 1950s. David had fought with distinction in the Malaysian emergency as part of his national service and then settled in London, doing various jobs to earn his bread. But his real desire was to be an artist and when he was just over 40 he finally managed to enrol in the City and Guilds Art School as a mature student, helped by a small inheritance when his mother died.

I loved his landscapes and by now must own about 10 of them. Though desperately unfashionable in elite artistic circles, they have always sold well when given the chance and when amazingly David once got two prints into the Royal Academy summer exhibition he made quite a lot of money. Two pictures I've acquired come to mind. One is a park bench in – of course – a park with no one sitting on it. The greenery is beautifully, not to say lushly painted. I hate the word “symbolic”, as to me what something or someone is must surely be more important than anything it may seem to represent. But this empty bench in such a beautiful place does seem somehow, in a way I can't explain, to speak of a profound loneliness, a feeling that David I know has felt, like many of us, quite often in his life.

Another picture, visible from where I am writing, is a landscape with fields rising up to an utterly and unnaturally black sky. On the horizon perch three tiny very bright buildings. I suspect these buildings seem so bright because the white paper David used has been left unpainted, a technique used I believe by Thomas Girtin in the late 18th century and much admired by Turner. Its meaning, if it has one, seems obvious to me, but then I have looked at the picture many times, and indeed must have seen it much more often than the artist himself. David's pictures are unfashionable because looked at superficially they seem much too traditional. But any sensitive artist cannot help reflecting the thoughts and feelings of his own time. In a hundred years these landscapes will be looked at very differently and speak to people of what it was like to live both in our own time and of course in any time. C. Day Lewis, writing of course about poetry, touches very sensitively on this subject in his book *The Poetic Image*.

My great interest in and love of Claude, much encouraged by David Parry, is unusual in our society, or – to be more accurate – unusual among those specialists who write about art. Roger Fry's essay on him puts very succinctly the accepted view. I know very well that Claude depicts an ideal world, one which never existed and which probably never can exist, but escaping into an illusion can be valuable if you realise that it *is* an illusion. If I couldn't get away from morbid thoughts about work by means of a long walk, a trip to see my favourite Claude could be a worthy substitute. Plus the landscape around Rome is surprisingly like those Claude painted. I commissioned Anne Marlow, referred to above, to paint one wall in my flat as I hoped Claude might have done, though wisely I did not tell her this. The result was in fact nothing like Claude but was still curiously effective.

There was a darker side to David which occasionally emerged in his work. I possess another painting depicting the Flying Dutchman's ship, inspired probably by the Wagner opera which at least once I saw with him. Somehow this picture depicts successfully both the ship and Wagner's feelings which inspired the opera. The picture hangs today in our spare bedroom, and

is so powerful that one guest quietly removed it while she was sleeping there. This I regard as a tribute to the picture's emotional force.

David introduced me to another even more unusual painter, Michael Meikle, who lived and still lives in Croydon near East Croydon station, though these days in protected accommodation. His father was killed in the war; his mother died of tuberculosis not long after. Sadly, they weren't married, which led to an unhappy lengthy period in orphanages for Michael. He tried at one point to burn his children's home down, and this led to imprisonment. Then he had a much-deserved stroke of luck. One of the first art therapists in England, Patricia Thurston, befriended him and he began to draw. Later he – briefly – attended art school. Understandably Michael ended up in various asylums earlier in his life but has now lived quietly outside them for at least thirty years. I own many pictures of his, some purchased from him and some which he has given to me. He paints in many styles. He can paint beautiful tiny landscapes which I perch very effectively on my bookshelves in front of my books. But there are bigger much more obviously personal works. My favourite is called *Dr John Connolly Racing for Home*. It depicts a yacht racing towards the harbour at Westport in Ireland escaping a very obviously approaching storm. John Connolly is an Irish psychiatrist who was successful in helping Michael in London before returning to run a hospital in the west of Ireland. There is undoubtedly some sort of symbolism here, all the more effective because I think it sprang unconsciously from Michael's mind and is markedly unobvious. But it is a picture that tells a story that words can't. And Michael's long series of self-portraits, a few of which I possess, would make a tremendous effect if all hung in one large room – or series of rooms – as many of Rembrandt's were in an exhibition in London some years ago. I suspect one day this may happen – but long after my death and his.

Ann Whitwell's chain of friendship led on via David Parry to yet two more painters, Louella Gwillim and Tony Tribe, who married so soon after I met them that I find it hard to believe they ever lived separately. Louella I met first; she was studying at the City and Guilds Art School in Kennington with David Parry. She asked for a glass of whisky when I first met her in my flat and I have never known her drink whisky since. Was it the shock of seeing me – or my flat? Perhaps I have proved less scary than she first thought. Their paintings –and drawings - also hang here in my house. Like David they have a great respect for traditional art and its forms but as with David they are nothing but very modern painters. I think it would surprise them to know that I often find their work hard to tell apart. After a few – I suspect – frustrating years in London they upped sticks and bought a house in Blaenavon in Gwent. Louella had and has many relations nearby but also they made there a proper space in which to paint, something which would have been impossible for them in London. Trips to Blaenavon to see their work have been – I am fumbling for the right adjectives here - both fruitful and exciting. In October 2019 they held a joint exhibition with some other friends of their work in London opposite the entrance to the Chelsea football ground. I bought two pictures from them, the most recent of quite a few acquisitions, both landscapes and both very different from each other.

One of Tony's pictures, the first I acquired, is of a Somerset landscape with a village with a church tower near the top of a hill. In a field lower down is a water trough for cows to drink from. I have become very familiar with that water trough, often looking at it while I write my diary. Truly it needs Ruskin to write about it. It simmers and glows and provides an extraordinarily effective centre for the picture. I have no idea whether Tony planned this, but any good picture almost by definition has consequences for the viewer, probably unintended by the artist. In a good picture, the more of these there are the merrier.

I'm visiting Tony and Louella in their house at Blaenavon in Gwent. It's 9.30 p.m.; I'm tired. I say good night, full of many confused thoughts and feelings arising from spending the evening with them. I refuse Louella's offer of a lift and walk the half mile downhill across a busy river to my bed and breakfast room. It is bleak and cold and easy to imagine what this landscape would be like if human beings and all their often very annoying paraphernalia ceased to exist. I'm relieved to see my bed and breakfast's front door ahead. Almost to my surprise the key works. I am very happy. And, oddly, the thought of my return to London tomorrow makes me happy too.

Tony Tribe, quite without realising it, taught me something about writing. He is an excellent art teacher as well as an artist, and I attended a series of evening classes he gave near St Mary Abbots church in Kensington. I can only remember one lecture well – on Daumier – but I can remember his lecturing technique. On the whole he avoided general statements about his subjects but led us through a series of slides of the artist's work, gradually building up a picture of what he had done before – possibly – committing himself to some more general remarks at the end. Such a technique would probably not have won you many marks in the Cambridge Historical Tripos but it is a better way of tackling many subjects than most. If I used it more often I'd be a better writer.

Thanks again to Ann Whitwell, this chain of artist friends is still not at an end. Through David I met another artist, Tony Dunigan. Like David he had served in the army, but as an enlisted man who had fought in Aden under Colonel Colin Mitchell, known in the popular press as “Mad Mitch”. Keen to become an artist he managed to transfer to the Ordnance Survey in Southampton and later attended Hastings Art School. His work is very detailed and precise and it is no coincidence that he greatly admires artists such as Mackintosh Patrick. As an etcher he has one of the best techniques in England today; I have in my drawing room a wonderful linocut of Hales Church in Norfolk, where the clouds above are full I suspect quite unintentionally of a sort of ominous foreboding which so often escapes other modern artists when they try very purposefully to depict it. Tony's life has been a tough one. For some years he worked in a furniture factory which he hated and much later cared unstintingly for his mother before her death. Partly to care for her he moved out of London to live in a council flat at Oulton Broad near Lowestoft on very little. I remain haunted by the print of an oak in Knole Park that I bought from him many years ago. His small flat near Oulton Broad is a pleasure to visit because of the beautiful antique furniture, bought I suspect very cheaply by him in second hand furniture shops and more recently on-line.

I've taken a train to Oulton Broad North station, via Norwich. Tony meets me and we walk to his flat. It's small but beautifully furnished with pieces often bought from charity shops. Tony has excellent taste in what I believe the antique trade calls “brown furniture.” We always have the same lunch: cold ham, boiled potatoes and peas. Then we look at his recent work and later sit down and chat. If it's fine we may stroll to Oulton church from which there is a broad view over the marshes towards the sea, a view Tony has often painted. For some reason the talk always seems richer if preceded by looking at his pictures and interrupted by a walk. Finally, a return to dullness: a cab ride to the nearest hotel. Mind you, this particular cabbie who drives me has just been holidaying in Bangkok with his Thai wife.

A reader may think I have strayed a long way from my flat in this chapter, but not so. Now I did own a flat, buying pictures was possible, and not just reproductions of famous paintings, but paintings actually created by my own friends. I wanted to cover my walls with them, and I succeeded. I began to understand, if only slightly, what it must be like to live in a country house where a famous painting looks at you each day and you look back. Slowly some, but never all,

of its secrets come to reveal themselves. The pictures become friends, but friends who sometimes tell you more about yourself than you might wish to know. And you may come to know them better than the artists ever did. And of course much better than is possible in an art gallery.

During all this time I did not lose touch with my older relatives. My paternal grandparents in Chesterfield I saw much less than I should have done. I feel ashamed now that I did not visit more often, but I found their company duller than I think I would now, not understanding that if I'd been more open with them about my problems they would certainly have been very sympathetic in return. And of course their problems would now be far more interesting. I'm surprised that no one has ever written a play when by magic three generations of relatives meet, all of the same age, and just talk. Shaw or Priestley – or some modern playwright sadly unknown to me – might have been – or might be - wonderful at this.

After my grandfather's death in 1967 my grandmother lived on till she died in 1981, and here I did to a tiny extent redeem myself. Two or three times a year I would take the train up to Derbyshire and have lunch with her in the station hotel in Chesterfield before visiting either her old people's home in Loundsley Green nearby or various mysterious great aunts and uncles whose identities never became really clear in my mind. To my shame I can remember almost nothing of my talks with her, which I should have written down in my diary afterwards. In fact, also to my shame, I can remember more of the train journeys there and back. Once I sat opposite two young undergraduates from Nottingham University whose extraordinary beauty transfixed me all the way back to St. Pancras. On a different train journey all I could do was hum quietly to myself the final movement of one of Handel's opus 6 grand concertos. I think my grandmother would have understood the first experience but not the second. Mind you, on her only visit to the opera she adored Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*, so who am I to say? It's disconcerting to think that a whole life of wonderful opera-going was deprived to her because she was born in the wrong place and at the wrong time.

SOUTH AUDLEY STREET

Often in my life the reality has not been as bad as my anticipation of it. But in 1980 two things happened which in retrospect were not improvements, although looking back many years later I can see there were upsides too. One seemed to be a disaster from the start; the other turned into a disaster after rather more than a year or two of bewildering happiness. The immediate disaster was a transfer from Marylebone to Mayfair Library, off South Audley Street where once again I was appointed deputy librarian in a small library roughly the same size as Church Street Library but as different as possible in almost every other way. Here there was no violence or threat of it, but instead emotional chaos, caused by dissension among the staff. I was plunged into this maelstrom with no warning, and with hardly any briefing about what was happening. In fact I do not think the Westminster Libraries administrators had any idea of the emotional situation there. Ironically the library was beautifully built and in a beautiful setting, with the Grosvenor Chapel opposite and immediately to the east a small park which possibly was the site of a mass burial during the great plague of 1665.

There is something distasteful about describing such matters. To compare great things with small, Kenneth Clark manages it very well in his account of his directorship of the National Gallery; John Rothenstein less well, although not badly, in his parallel account of life at the Tate Gallery. Art galleries curiously seem particularly prone to such psychological upheavals. Clark keeps it short and avoids self-pity, not an easy thing to do in a memoir. Suffice it to say that the

District Librarian, whom I quite liked personally, was an ineffective manager of staff and that I became trapped between her and the rest of the staff. I was quite unable to keep the peace between them and ended up being disliked by nearly everybody there. As one of my weaknesses, a disastrous weakness if you're in charge of people, is a constant desire to be liked, I ended up being very unhappy. I will write little more about this, but the reader must not think I did not suffer greatly at this time. Suffice it to say that when much later my former boss had a stroke and ended up helpless in hospital, I could not bear to visit her. I am not proud of this, although I doubt my absence disturbed her overmuch. Indeed she may possibly have been very slightly relieved by it. In the end she was forcibly retired, though not while I still worked there.

My desire not to hurt or offend people has, rightly or wrongly, been a theme of my life, and bears a little further discussion. In his Sermon on the Mount, Christ tells us: "blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." As a non-Christian, far be it for me to criticise Christian priests, but it is worth noting that never in my life, either in the many sermons I have listened to or elsewhere, have I heard anyone preach on this passage. I think most Christians, like most people anywhere, find it most distasteful and prefer not to think about it. What sort of society would exist if people obeyed it? A very different society from today's or any other that has ever existed. Was my meekness, if that is the right word for it, caused by my stammer or quite independent of it? I suspect the latter, but can never be sure. What I am certain of is that the tremendous anger inside me, always so far effectively concealed, is both its opposite and fellow. In my mind I am very often very critical of other people, but other people are I am sure quite unaware of it. I sometimes read Blake's poem *The Clod and the Pebble* when I am angry, and it calms me down slightly. C.S. Lewis wrote that Shakespeare's sonnets can usefully be read as an extended unconscious commentary on this poem, and doing this would calm anybody down, if only because of the intellectual effort in understanding them.

It is some time in the early 1980s, and I'm waiting for a train on an underground station, probably at Tottenham Court Road on the southbound Northern Line. I see a very beautiful young woman, almost certainly a foreigner, struggling to extract a soft drinks bottle from a slot machine. I'm much more experienced at such matters than she is. She gives up and joins her friends in a train about to depart. I run to the machine, extract the bottle and turn around. There she is looking at me, and without thinking I lob the bottle towards her, amazingly missing everyone in the way. Perhaps those boring cricket practices at school are finally paying off. She catches the bottle – is she a Swedish cricketer, I momentarily wonder - and gives me a superb unrepeatable smile as the doors shut. The train speeds off towards Leicester Square. Does she, I wonder, wherever she is, remember this scene as I do? And where is she today?

Our underground system in London is in some ways the most fascinating part of the city, and would I think interest a visitor from the Middle Ages more than anything else about it. Any fleeting incident you see may affect you for ever. Once in the early 1970s I was descending the escalator at Baker Street and opposite ascending was a young couple. The woman was upset and crying, and said to her partner: "How dare you be unfaithful and abandon me like this!" Her tear-strewn face has haunted me ever since. Has the memory affected my behaviour in any way? I don't know. And did the woman ever meet someone else and, as the saying goes, live happily ever after? I shall never know.

Such moments can be exciting but often very sad. Very often we meet people fleetingly, and not always below ground, and know that this swift moment of contact cannot be extended. Once at the Victoria Library enquiry desk two young women – and such people were not always women –

came in and asked about the Wallace collection. They even knew that Frans Hals's *Laughing Cavalier* was there and not in the National Gallery, a fact known to very few tourists, as an attendant at the National Gallery once told me. I asked them where they came from, and when they said Chicago asked them whether they could recommend the Milwaukee art gallery, not so many miles away to the north by rail. They could, obviously knew the gallery well, and began to give me a witty and concise lecture on the pictures there, until all too soon a new enquirer interrupted us. Where are these ladies now? In Chicago suburbs, happy with husbands, children and maybe – by now – grandchildren? Once again I shall never know. But perhaps one day there will be scary ways to find out.

Again and again I learnt one important lesson from all this, a lesson I was beginning to learn earlier but which I still should have learned much faster. This was that I was quite unfitted for jobs where I was in charge of anybody, and should concentrate on what I was starting to do really quite well: enquiry desk work. I think my bosses were beginning to understand this too. In 1984 I was transferred to Marylebone Library again, and with one 2-year break I worked there, and similarly at Victoria Library, till I retired in 2005. Gradually the attitude of colleagues towards me changed. I became the elderly expert – though I was far less expert and rather less old than many thought – who threatened nobody's position and who would always listen sympathetically to anyone's questions. That this was at least partly a façade didn't seem to matter. I suspect some older teachers at some schools end up in the same position when they fail to become, and maybe do not wish to become, headmasters.

It is 5 a.m., probably in the summer of 1981. I wake up and am paralysed with dread at having to go to work and face the Mayfair staff, most of whom seem to hate me for reasons I don't understand. Somehow I get up at once and unthinkingly take a train from Peckham Rye station to Purley where I walk up Plough Lane and turn into Church Hill, passing no. 12, where I had lived as a child. Can I wield a magic wand and turn myself into a 10-year-old boy, with fond parents ready to welcome me if I ring the doorbell? Obviously not. I walk pass Downside School, still a preparatory school but now with a different headmaster, and up to the strange fake Woodcote village green, where I sit in the rising sun and contemplate sadly the approaching day. Slowly, grudgingly, indirectly, I walk back to the station, taking in my old piano teacher's house on Manor Way. I know the working day must be faced. And when I do face it, things aren't quite so bad as I feared.

When I transferred to Marylebone Library in 1984 I also began to work part time. This was a momentous change; I was I think only the second person ever to do this in the Westminster library system, and it involved complicated negotiations with the management, who at first could think of no conventionally acceptable way to help me. Here Nova Atkinson, by this time a benevolent superior, was very helpful and arranged for me to job-share with I think the only employee in the whole of Westminster Council who then worked part time. This was a façade; our tasks were really quite separate. I was surprised that Nova helped me, a surprise I wisely kept to myself as it was not very flattering to her. My titular partner was a very beautiful middle-aged woman whose name I'm ashamed to have forgotten, a semi-retired fashion model who occasionally appeared in television adverts: she played the well-groomed mother of the perfect family at breakfast, advertising – of course – breakfast cereal. It was odd seeing her on a photograph on an escalator at Baker Street tube station and then meeting the real person a few minutes later. Now of course in many places, including Westminster Libraries, such part-time working is very common.

My partner was kindness itself, and extremely effective at dealing with my stammer. She was a fund of amusing stories. Her occasional television adverts were nearly all filmed in one immensely long day, starting when a car picked her up, usually at about 5 a.m., to drive her to the site in question. Once an advert was set at Osterley Park House, and a small boy had to be fed chocolate – presumably this was an advert for chocolate of the sort that is now banned. His vomiting delayed matters considerably.

My transfer from Mayfair Library probably came just in time. Before I suddenly realised that part time work was possible, in my extreme unhappiness I seriously considered – though not for very long – giving up librarianship altogether. By this time I was working a few hours a week voluntarily at the newly founded British Stammering Association, and enquired whether I could retrain as a speech therapist. This would have been a huge change, and financially very costly. When I was transferred to Marylebone Library, and even more when I began to work part time, I quickly gave the idea up. And through good luck part time working was much less harmful to my pension than I had feared.

There was one object that threatened my continued existence as a librarian: the computer. At Cambridge I'd become friendly with an American Marshall scholar who was doing astronomical – or maybe cosmological – research, and before playing squash with him at some extremely early hour in the morning I occasionally would accompany him when he removed punched tape from a very large object, occupying a large part of a room, which I believe was a computer. (He'd been allotted a very unsocial hour to do this as he was a lowly research student.) Since then things had begun to change. First, all the card catalogues were computerised, together with Westminster Libraries' very primitive plastic card issuing system. Then, I had to learn to use both Word and the internet. This wasn't easy, but in the end I mastered enough detail to keep my job. I even passed a ridiculously named examination called the European Union Driving License. This was a computer examination, not a driving test. This was as well, since as an attentive reader will remember I'd failed the Driving Test three times and had crashed the car during the third and last test.

There was a curiously satisfactory coda to my 4-year stint at Mayfair Library. The new chief librarian there came to me one day and told me how difficult he'd found the staff. He asked me for any advice I could offer. My heart leapt with joy! Not all of the turmoil had been my fault! My successor was made of sterner stuff than me; not only was the District Librarian retired; he tried to get at least one other person there transferred or dismissed. Whether he succeeded I don't know.

The other disaster, preceded by an ecstatic happiness that lasted about a year, was caused by love. I use this word advisedly, because this certainly was love, not mere sexual desire. I will call the lady Elaine. She is still alive and I don't wish to embarrass her, though probably I have more cause for embarrassment than she has. Her daughter – not mine - is now a distinguished scholar working at the British Museum.

ELAINE

I met her at Church Street Library in June 1980, walking up a staircase at whose top she was standing. We looked at each other and something, I am not sure what, slowly passed between us. I did not instantly fall in love; it took about three sessions coaching her before I succumbed. I think at the beginning she really did fall for me, a situation so strange that it took me time to understand it. She didn't even seem to mind my stammer. She was fair-haired, short and with a

beautiful figure, although it was her interest in art and poetry that was the clincher. She also had – an important matter for me – a very beautiful voice. Later on at Victoria Library I met another lady, who was as beautiful, but with an ugly rasping voice. For someone like me to dislike someone because of the way she spoke was, shall we say, a trifle irrational. Elaine also had very beautiful Italic handwriting. Who had taught her this? Surely no one at what seemed to be the sink state schools she had attended. Anyone curious enough to see what she looked like has only to look at the portrait of the actress Elaine Terry's niece in the Dukes Hall at the Royal Academy of Music in London to find out. Unlike many women, I don't think Elaine would have liked wearing the very posh clothes in the portrait.

I was far too shy, and just possibly too wise, to ask her out while I was, in effect, her boss's deputy. It also worried me that I seemed so much older than her. I had forgotten that my maternal grandfather was exactly the same number of years older than his wife – although it was a second wife. Then, conveniently in this context, I was transferred to Mayfair Library. After much hesitation, which included almost missing a train at Exeter St. David's Station whilst not quite managing to post a letter to her, I did actually post a letter to her near the Grosvenor Chapel in Mayfair. To my surprise she answered.

Our first few dates were tentative and inconclusive. We saw a Peter Sellers film, *Being There*, which I think she enjoyed more than I did. Then we sat in an Indian restaurant, just off Leicester Square, staring at each other inconclusively but certainly with considerable desire for a very long time. Finally – and it almost was finally – I asked her for a walk along the North Downs Way starting at Merstham Station. This was a disaster. There was far too much mud for her, and we ended up repairing ourselves at the Feathers Inn near the station. Then on the way home and even more tentatively, I asked her to my flat. She agreed although when we reached Honor Oak Park station I could see she disliked walking up One Tree Hill and was relieved when the road began to slope downwards. I think she liked the flat when she saw it.

After an awkward half hour while we talked aimlessly I kissed her and she sprang into life. I could hardly believe what was obviously true, that she had been waiting nervously for this to happen. We lay on the floor – luckily it was well carpeted – and touched for several hours before she unwillingly left. Many people have tried and failed to describe sexual experiences and I am not going to join them. Evelyn Waugh wrote that he would have liked to try in *Brideshead Revisited* but I wonder if he would have succeeded if he had. Suffice it to say that I perhaps should have wondered more why I had had to wait to the age of 34 before I had experienced such a thing. Instead I thanked fate – who do we thank when we do not believe in God? – for granting me such a respite from ordinariness. Mind you, being in love can be very unfair to mere ordinariness.

From the beginning there were warning signals this might not last. Elaine was in fact 13 years younger than me – she was 22 – and obviously I think had had far less general experience of the world than I had, though just possibly more experience of the arts of love. She also came from a very different background in every sense. Her family was much fractured; she, her mother and her brother had lived in Redcar but had left her father because of abuse, certainly violent abuse but possibly sexual as well. They all fled on a train to London and the very same day they arrived, her mother found rooms in a big house in Belsize Park where she worked as a cleaner to pay for their lodgings. Perhaps because of all this Elaine felt she was stupid as well as – astonishingly – ugly. She cannot have been that ugly as at the age of 15 she was somehow chosen as an extra in the film *Digby, the Biggest Dog in the World*, a film I sadly have never seen.

It was true she did not do well at school, but later, encouraged much more by the man she eventually married than by me, she took an art degree at the Central School of Arts and Crafts – as it then was – and became a painter of Greek icons. Her daughter is a scholar and I suspect an excellent artist like her parents, though I have seen very little of her work. I got many things wrong about Elaine, but one thing I got emphatically right was that she was much brighter than she thought she was. And her love of poetry and art was quite genuine. I remember attending an exhibition of David Jones's work at what is now Tate Britain and understanding more about this artist through her help. We both loved Samuel Palmer and it is impossible for me even today to look at one of his pictures without recalling her. When we split up temporarily just before Christmas in 1980 I – wisely? – tempted her back into seeing me after 4 months by sending her a postcard of Palmer's *The Magic Apple Tree*, a wonderful picture now in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.

That period between December 1980 and April 1981 when I did not see her was undoubtedly the unhappiest in my life so far, far surpassing any bereavements I have suffered and even unhappier than when I ceased to see her in 1988. I often lay in bed moaning and even sometimes shouted at the ceiling. I was full of self-pity and it only occasionally occurred to me to wonder why she had done this and what she was thinking. At least – or so I thought at the time – I was not making a fool of myself as Hazlitt had done when he wrote the *Liber Amoris*. I made no attempt to approach Elaine until I sent that successful card. I think Brahms may have felt something similar when he wrote the development section of the slow movement of his B flat piano concerto.

It is a day in February 1981, gloomy and overcast until thankfully it gets dark. I have been to a poetry reading at the Crown and Greyhound pub in Dulwich Village. I walk back home to my flat and as I creep up Court Lane a melancholy descends down onto me as I've never experienced before or since. Somehow I fight my way to my flat in Ryedale, wearily have a bath and contemplate bed. Instead I put a record on, of the opening chorus of Bach's Cantata BWV 139: Wohl dem, der sich auf seinem Gott. Somehow, despite my complete lack of Christian faith, I'm comforted. I at last remember that others may be worse off than me and sleep.

Only once again in my life did I experience anything at all like this, and this was in the late 1980s when I sat on the front steps of the Tate Gallery, now Tate Britain, looking at the Thames. I was unable to move for at least an hour, even though I had a particular reason for returning home quickly. But the intensity was much less, and here there was perhaps a partly unconscious reason: an attempt to assimilate emotionally the fact that both my parents, whom I loved, would die soon. Melancholy caused by the fear of predictable events in the future is a very different matter. Here the best solution is to sit down, list whatever actions can be taken to improve matters, and get on and deal with them. Of course, not all problems have solutions.

I met Elaine again in April 1981 in the *Wellington* pub in Crawford Street off the Marylebone Road. That birthday card, of a Samuel Palmer painting which I knew she would like, had worked. It was an extraordinary experience sitting in the pub waiting for her – I was almost always first at our meetings – and then seeing her glide across the floor to the bar and then swivel around looking around for me. We both shared the illusion that if we didn't have to work and could afford a cottage somewhere in the country we might be happy. I almost believed this when I was with her but not when I was alone. A copious reading of books about Edward Thomas had spared me of that illusion. We therefore spent quite a lot of the rest of 1981 and of 1982 walking in the country, visiting many beauty spots both well-known and not, and crossing surprising distances for a couple in love. Juniper Top to the east of Box Hill was a favourite, plus Ranmore

Common on the other side of the Mole valley. We had no car of course, but that is a small handicap when you are young in the Home Counties, where it is easier to find solitude, especially during the week, than many think. Once we ended up at Wakehurst Place, found the bus back to Haywards Heath station had been cancelled, and walked the whole distance ourselves. A trek up to the top of Blackdown from Haslemere station was another favourite. On Princess Diana's wedding day – Elaine was a gentle but determined anti-royalist - we took a train to Gomshall station and walked up near the top of the North Downs and rested there for most of the day. Elaine did not dislike the royal family; she pitied them for being put, through no fault of their own, in a position from which there was no escape. Years later when I wrote a review of the book *The King's Speech* by Mark Logue and Peter Conradi, for the British Stammering Association website, I remembered that day.

Perhaps our happiest day was not a country walk, but a day out to Arundel where we wandered around the town, had lunch in a pub and carefully neglected to see the castle, mostly a splendid Victorian fake but still a fake. That castle was many years later to play an important role in a very strange day in my life. On another day we walked to Steep, Edward Thomas's final home, failed to find the house that an architect friend had built for him, but did find the church where Laurence Whistler, the artist Rex Whistler's brother, engraved one of Thomas's poems on a memorial window.

It was not Elaine's beauty – though she had that in plenty - but the poetry in her that made her irresistible to me as a companion. This was accompanied by a speaking voice which was so extraordinary she could have used it professionally if given the chance. She loved the poetic art in general, but had a particular love for Hardy and Edward Thomas shared by me. She read Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* - without doubt Gaskell's masterpiece – and loved it. Where this important aspect of her character came from I don't know; there seemed little sign of it in her background, but then there was a lot about her background and earlier life that I didn't know. Always at the end of our days out the shadows fell as our train approached London and we often went our separate ways to Dulwich and Belsize Park.

We are in the train between Betchworth and Reigate holding hands At Redhill we must change trains on to the main London-Brighton line and our rural idyll will effectively be at an end. The magic of waiting at Box Hill Station disappears into the distance. We do not speak and as always I have no idea what Elaine is thinking. Hardy would have written about this moment, did write about such moments, better than I ever have. Read "At the Railway Station, Upwey", to see what I mean.

Some years later I visited Upwey station, just north of Weymouth in Dorset, on one of those futile missions which never recapture how the original writer felt. It didn't help that Hardy's station had effectively disappeared. Hardy's spirit is especially difficult to track down. I've never visited the house he built for himself outside Dorchester, which I'm told is a crashing disappointment. One day, if I'm strong enough, I may try to do better at Castle Boterel.

The blame for my increasing problems with Elaine lay I think mainly with me, although in such matters certainty is hard to attain. I simply did not have the self-confidence to commit to her. I avoided introducing her to my parents, although she herself was very shy and not keen to meet either them or indeed my friends. Later, when she introduced me to new friends she had met at her art classes, I realised she had far more in common with them. Both my attitude and hers were stupid, as I think all these people would have been kind and polite to her as her friends were to me. But it is a weakness in me that I like all human relations to be peaceful and riftless.

However any cementing relationship, whether a marriage or not, will always open up at least a gentle rift or two with other people. I had seen this happen with many friends, and should have risked more in 1981 and 1982 to save matters.

In 1982 we holidayed abroad for the first and last time, at Killarney in Ireland. This was very much Elaine's idea – she loved the idea of Ireland – but I was happy to tag along. We spent a brief week in a cottage in the gap of Dunloe north of Killarney. We took a boat from Fishguard to Rosslare and then a curious elongated train journey onward to Killarney, changing at Limerick Junction, which we rapidly discovered is some distance from Limerick. My father is entirely of Irish descent, so I am in fact half Irish, but I have never felt any affinity with Irishness except on that trip, when gradually something mysterious and Celtic began to seep into me, as it has with so many visitors to Ireland from Spenser onwards. In fact I began to worry after a bit that it might seep too far. Elaine felt quite differently and I think could have spent the rest of her life quite happily there had fate led that way. Our relationship was fraying by that time, but that holiday concealed the fact quite effectively for a while.

It is some time in 1982. We have just arrived at Southease Station, surely one of the loneliest and loveliest stations in south east England, but ideal for us. We cross over the railway line and stop to look at the church, solitary on the slope of the South Downs except for one or two houses. It is a perfect day with a few clouds to complicate what otherwise I would have found a boring cloudless sky. Lewes to the north and Newhaven to the south could both be a hundred miles away. The river Ouse – I suddenly remember with a jolt that Virginia Woolf drowned nearby in it about 40 years ago – winds sluggishly beneath us. I look at Elaine. She is quiet, pensive. I have no idea of her thoughts. It's as though I'm standing in front of a desk I've inherited from a stranger. I have no idea what is in the drawers. Later I wrote a very short poem about this, I hope better than this prose:-

No arbours here but still a simple tower,
Trees by it and a house not full of noise,
Triangular green in place and birdsong rising
Up across the valley over the station
To join the stationary skylarks high above.
And from your face? Silence, of course, as always,
Dearer to me than mere unalterable landscape;
And under that no obvious compartment
From which most ordinary persons draw their speech
But drawer after drawer unopened that I gaze at.

This poem, whatever its faults, is frank about my ignorance of the woman I loved. Many very great poems aren't. In Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* we never even learn her name, and indeed I have wondered if she ever existed. In Matthew Arnold's *To Marguerite: Continued*, one of the very greatest poems ever written in English, we at least do learn her name, but that is it. And was she really called Marguerite? No one reading this poem could doubt that she existed.

I had moved into my flat in May 1979, and slowly slid into a new way of life, spending most of my time there but quite a lot of time – some might argue too much time – with my parents. Most Sundays I spent there, and quite often spent one weekday night with them too. My father had a heart attack in 1982, and was never quite the same afterwards, though real senility did not set in till about 1990. But I loved their house, as did many of my friends. As several remarked to me, there was a strange numinous quality about the view from the drawing room through the sun parlour into the garden with a rose trellis on its right-hand border. And often I used one of the walks starting from its site in Raymond Road as a first stage on my way home.

Two walks to the house were favourites. One involved getting off at Putney station, walking up Putney Hill and then across Putney Heath and Wimbledon Common to Wimbledon village and beyond to Raymond Road where my parents lived. The windmill was a favourite landmark on my way. Another was from my brother's house in Barnes across Richmond Park to Robin Hood Gate. Curiously I remember these walks best during really cold days in winter. Perhaps it was anticipating the warmth and welcome at my parents' house that caused this.

Many more walks were easily accessible from Wimbledon Station than from my flat. Ironically, just after I had bought the flat but before I could get access to it I did a wonderful walk on my own after catching a train from Wimbledon station to Pulborough. From there I walked to Parham Park across Amberley Wild Brooks. There is a short piano piece by John Ireland which well captures the strange eerie atmosphere of these meadows. And the house at Parham is far from disappointing when you reach it, even though recently the owners sold their Claude to pay for repairs.

Solitary walking became once again an increasing part of my life as I spent less and less time with Elaine. It was not I think that she disliked walking; more that she wanted to spend more and more time with artists whom she respected and from whom, rightly, she felt she could learn. Art was more important to her than poetry. In 1978 my friend Jim Crossland, who had become financially very successful through becoming a director of *Microgen*, a computer company, not long after its inception, bought a big house at Broxmore near Sherfield English on the border between Hampshire and Wiltshire. He often asked me down, and twice I brought Elaine there, who loved it, before our friendship finally fractured. I enjoyed being there but even more loved walking there. My favourite walk was from Winchester station, partly along the old Roman Road from Winchester to Salisbury, where at the summit of the walk there is a curious memorial to a horse whose rider survived after they both had inadvertently jumped over a cliff. Another walk I loved was again from Winchester, but this time along the Itchen navigation canal to Eastleigh and Southampton airport, where Jim almost always picked me up before we enjoyed an Indian meal in Southampton.

This walk had a wonderful start, a sort of overture to the main event. Leaving Winchester station you walked south-eastwards towards the high street, and when you reached the statue of Alfred the Great you turned right along the river Itchen, skirting Winchester College until you reached St Cross, a curious remnant of medieval monasticism where you could ask for a slice of bread and a pint of beer if you could convincingly say you had walked there. (A special curse awaits those who surreptitiously park cars nearby.) Once, before Elaine and I had parted, we sat by the Itchen there and saw a double rainbow spread out to the east, a sight well worth the sacrifice of being drenched by a sharp shower. After walking under the M3 you continue along the canalized Itchen till you reach Eastleigh. Thence along a very un-English straight road till you reach Southampton Airport station, where from the bridge over the railway to Southampton you can watch planes taking off and landing, still a thrill for me then even though I was approaching

middle age. I noticed that very few schoolboys ever accompanied me on the bridge.

I think Edward Thomas would have understood these walks. I was not escaping from a difficult marriage and from the drudgery of reviewing as he was, but the exercise and the often wonderful views did put my problems into perspective. I did not have a wife or steady girl friend to love, but things went deeper than that. Any stammerer whose affliction is more than trifling sometimes feels the need to escape from the burden of being with people, however charming these people may be or however much he loves them. Make no mistake; I was fortunate in my friends, all of whom had virtues that went far deeper than charm. But I needed quite often to be on my own, and walking was a good way to achieve this. I could think and feel and did not have to speak.

Some stopping places became good friends. The walk to Jim Crossland's house near Sherfield English passes by Clarendon, a royal palace in medieval times but now a ruin, and stopping there became a romantic experience which Thomas Gray would have well understood. Much later, when Jim Crossland moved to a flat in Bournemouth, on his way to depart later for France, my walk there from Hinton Admiral Station necessitated crossing the mouth of Christchurch harbour by ferry. This must be one of the shortest ferries in Britain, with a crossing fee then of just a pound. A passenger once told me, with what truth I don't know, that the tiny boat's master was a retired captain of the QE2. I'm one of those fortunate people who love the interwar suburban architecture of many English towns, particularly seaside towns. There is a lot of this to look forward to as you approach the centre of Bournemouth on the coastal path.

My stays with Jim at the house where he lived before, exactly on the Hampshire-Wiltshire border, were magical events. Breakfasts on the grass outside the south side of the house were very special. Jim also made an extraordinary discovery. Piled up by a hedgerow nearby he found a bundle of remaindered paperback books. They were all of one book, *Melchet* by an author called Hugh Quigley, of whom neither of us had heard. This is a masterpiece, an account of his purchase in middle age of an orchard which he tried, with some success, to develop into a commercial proposition. But the book is much more than that. Its description of the countryside around him and of the changing seasons, and especially of the bitter winter of 1962-63 rivals any English nature book and reminds me of two very different earlier books, Kilvert's diary and Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne*. I hope when Jim dies he will donate his copy to the British Library, which at the time of writing does not possess one.

Walking to Jim's house was exciting because you never knew who would be there. On one occasion Susie Burrows, referred to below, brought along a lady I will call Margaret, a younger friend she had met while working in a night club in St. James's. Elaine and I had parted by that time, and I became friends with her, mainly because she wanted to learn how to play tennis. We practised in Lincoln's Inn Fields and later in Holland Park. Margaret was nearly 20 years younger than me and I never thought of becoming her boyfriend; rather I felt I was a sort of father figure, replacing in a very small way her parents with whom she did not get on well.

Then, without warning, her twin sister Mary appeared. She had returned from the United States where she had been a nanny. We met first in a café near Holborn underground station. It was I felt quite extraordinary for me to be sitting at a table with two very attractive young women, neither of whom I knew very well. What did they see in me? Perhaps nothing; perhaps this was just chance. Then one day Margaret phoned me: Mary had lost her job and with it somewhere to stay. Could she come and stay in my flat?

I felt I had to agree, and indeed part of me wanted to. In some ways the arrangement worked well. She always remained just a friend, which was certainly not because she wasn't attractive; the reverse was true. I was very cautious, and I think wisely cautious, in the way I approached her. In treating her as a friend I think I retained her respect. But the whole relationship was dangerously flattering to me: a young woman respecting me as a teacher about life when in fact I was very ignorant about most things. In the end, as she showed no sign of wanting determinedly to find a job, I had to ask her to leave. I still feel guilty about this. She had her parents and two sisters to fall back on, but her very disjunctive family did not help much.

My friendship with Susie Burrows had another much more permanent result. Her brother Stephen asked me to a party where I sat on a sofa with a strange young lady, though happily not as young as Christine and Caroline, who appeared to like me. I asked her out and it turned out she was called Annie Evans, the daughter of Peter Evans, who at that time was the Times newspaper's home affairs correspondent. Her mother was Danish, and there is a lot of Denmark in Annie. I'm still her friend today. At first I thought I had fallen in love with her; this was in the long interim period between leaving Elaine and meeting Valerie. The only problem was that Annie was quite sure she was not in love with me, a determination that has not wavered over more than thirty years and which, considering my nature, I have adapted to with surprising success.

Nor did our friendship waver. Gradually I began to accept the situation. It was as though a powerful blinding light gradually faded away and the resulting clarity enabled me to see Annie as she really was. There was another obstruction to this: her mental instability which slowly decreased over the years, helped partly by her assiduity in taking the medicine that kept her sane, despite the fact that she has had to endure much sadness. Two of her friends died quite suddenly; one killed himself, one died in a road accident. Then after her mother's death, she kept house gallantly for her father in his declining years. Though I am sure he loved his daughter, Peter was a difficult person to care for with decisive and often unreasonable views about cooking and many other things.

My friendship with Elaine had disappeared by the time I met Annie, but it disappeared agonisingly slowly. It was like the Cheshire cat in reverse, but *molto lento*. Finally, in the beginning of 1988 I wrote to her saying we could meet no more; she had become pregnant by another man and I found this impossible to bear. My stammer was worsening markedly under the strain and I felt I had to protect my speech, as if I didn't my job might be threatened. She often failed to turn up to agreed dates, which was infuriating but understandable considering her upbringing and her hatred of confronting unpleasant situations, a reluctance which I very much shared and share. And also there was something in her which wanted to keep me as a friend and not as a lover, which was very frustrating for me. Was my letter to her cruel? I leave that for others to judge. She never replied to it. When a year or two later I sent her a book of Ann Whitwell's drawings edited by Ann's mother after her death for which I had written a foreword, she did reply thanking me for it. The letter was mainly about her little daughter who was obviously bringing her great happiness. Her daughter's considerable later success surely showed indirectly that Elaine was never as stupid as she thought she was.

It's the summer of 1983. That week I'd travelled up to Belsize Park to see Elaine and found her walking up Haverstock Hill with another young man with whom she was obviously close. Horror of horrors, I'm engaged to travel to Bath to see my cousin Margaret for the weekend. My Aunt Kate of whom I'm very fond now lives with her after her brother Uncle Les's death. I can't bear to tell them how I feel, but how can I carry off a semblance of normality for a whole weekend? The

two nights there both seem interminable. On the Saturday afternoon I travel to Bath on my own, as I often did, and sit in the park near the abbey and watch very sadly all the glee and happiness around me. Will the weekend end? It does.

STUMBLING TOWARDS VALERIE

When I broke things off with Elaine, I had met no one else I loved or even wanted to be with. I did what I did hoping, but not very hopefully, that one day I might meet someone else I could love. I did not think this likely. I felt rather as Charles Ryder feels at the end of *Brideshead Revisited*, where he remarks that he has neither a home, a profession nor a family. But like Charles Ryder, I was wrong. I did have a profession and a home too, even though it was bare of many things I wanted. My family too, in the shape of both my parents and my brother and his family, was slowly to become more important. And, despite many detours, my wife slowly began to appear on the horizon, like a speck at the far end of a long valley.

Holidays became more important too, and it was about then that renting a cottage for a week or two gradually struck me as a possibility. While still with Elaine I began with renting part of a house at Rodmell in Sussex, partly because I'd read Leonard Woolf's autobiography which revealed that he and his wife Virginia had bought a summer residence there which later turned into their permanent home. But soon I became more ambitious and, first with Elaine and later, either alone or with other friends, rented a series of cottages in Pembrokeshire. St. Nicholas was where I started, well placed near such seaside villages as Abereddy where I stayed later. It never worried me that I didn't have a car, though I did depend a little sometimes on car-owning friends staying with me. A 5 mile walk from Abereddy to St. David's and back to buy provisions worried me not at all, and indeed was part of the fun of the holiday. I have never minded repeating a walk; there is always something more to be found or seen or thought on such occasions. I often walked along a cliff path rounding a cove wondering what Trafalgar Square with its column would look like if suddenly shoved into its centre. (Possibly the conclusion of the film *The Planet of the Apes* gave me this idea.) During my weeks there the mystery of the Pembrokeshire countryside with its constant yet constantly changing sea views slowly overwhelmed me, so that the outside world gradually grew further and further away. In turn worries about work, almost constantly with me in London, vanished into a tiny ball. Once in 1984 I walked down the hill into Fishguard and saw a billboard with the news of Indira Gandhi's assassination. Who was she, I wondered, and where did she die?

I'm walking along the Pembrokeshire Coastal Path, alone as usual, somewhere on Strumble Head. Suddenly I see a semi-circular crack in the ground surrounding me, forming a little island which could in theory slip away from the cliff at any time and cast me into oblivion. I walk carefully and slowly, trying by sheer willpower to weigh less than I do, and reach safety. Then I tread soberly till I reach a phone box, where I phone the coastal path authorities. They are annoyingly calm when I tell them what has happened.

Jim Crossland was one of the friends who joined me in Pembrokeshire, and indeed in other places such as Morteheo in Devon and Netherbury in Dorset. He was always a wonderful and uncomplaining chauffeur, but his friendship was much more important than that, mainly because he was so unlike me. He, together with Sam Tanner and Bryan Jobbins, had been introduced to me in January 1970 on a momentous evening by Alan Whitwell in a flat in Tooting

Bec in London. She warned me as we walked there across Tooting Bec Common that they were all mad, but she was of course wrong. She should have said that they were all eccentric. Jim had taken a degree in nuclear physics at Imperial College in London, but was interested in much more than orthodox science even though he has had a subscription to the *New Scientist* as long as I have known him. New age matters, which usually befuddled and confused me, took up a lot of his time. He indeed had a lot of spare time, because after making quite a lot of money as a director of *Microgen*, a recently founded computer company, he retired and bought that big house, already mentioned, at Sherfield English between Romsey and Salisbury, where I often spent weird yet satisfying weekends. I never succumbed, rightly or wrongly, to Jim's new age ideas but crossing intellectual swords with him about such matters was fun. He was also a great and effective distractor. On one occasion I rented a house at Woodgreen, a village just off the Salisbury Fordingbridge road at a time when my relations with Elaine, or rather lack of them, made me very melancholy. Jim's conversation soon restored a sense of perspective. He had walked all the way from his house at Sherfield English, sans car, to stay with me. Why had he left his perfectly serviceable car behind? I never found out.

I'm walking from Salisbury to Bemerton, a sort of pilgrimage walk to see where George Herbert, the Stuart poet and priest, lived and preached. Herbert must have known the walk well, as we know every week he walked into Salisbury to see friends and to worship in the cathedral. But I'm discontented; I want to finish the exciting Dick Francis novel I'm reading, and it is better at wrenching me away from morbid thoughts about Elaine than the beautiful countryside. I feel ashamed. Would Herbert have understood, I wonder? I begin to invent a dialogue between him and me about this most important matter. I never write it down, and that is probably just as well.

Jim often gave me useful lifts. Once he was driving from London to Crediton to see a friend, and he dropped me on the A303 just north of Amesbury, whence I walked down the Avon valley to Salisbury, passing through several beautiful villages including Wilsford and Great Durnford in an area not well known to tourists. At Wilsford I received a shock. In the church there is a memorial to Richard Sykes, killed by the I.R.A. when ambassador to the Netherlands in 1979. As a very little boy I had met Richard Sykes in Peking in 1952. Even in such a restful place – to the rambler – as Wilsford death is not far away. Karel Straub, a 19-year-old Dutch assistant at the embassy, was also killed that day. No doubt saddened friends and relatives of his still exist.

Ironically, work then became a most useful drug I used to suppress my unhappiness. My stammer became worse, possibly though not certainly because of my situation, and I joined a self-help group meeting at the Finsbury Health Centre for mainly middle-aged people like me who needed help talking. These sessions did help me a little. There was nothing like a cure, nor did I expect one, but my speech did improve a little, and my constant fear of being dismissed because of my stammer, always present up to this time, began to recede and never really troubled me again. And, not surprisingly – though to my shame it did surprise me – I met some very fascinating people there. Our periodical dinners after our sessions at an Indian restaurant in Exmouth Market nearby became highlights in my life. And, much later, three friendships made there revived in a most surprising way. Anyone who has seen a seemingly dead coal fire revive inexplicably will know what I mean.

It is 10 p.m. I've walked from the Finsbury Health Centre downhill to the 63 bus stop on the Farringdon Road. Ugly dark silent buildings surround me but I love the wideness and spaciousness of the road. An occasional van slips down to the Thames along a street where once a medieval river ran. I feel – quite wrongly – completely alone in the world and exult. Parry's great song "From A City Window" echoes through my mind. No one joins me at the bus stop and

when the bus comes it takes me within 100 yards of my flat. That Parry song is as good as almost anything by Schubert and it irritates me that very few continental singers make any attempt to learn English songs when they give recitals here.

Although my stammer did become considerably worse at times, it is worth considering why, as I know now, those in charge at the library never considered firing me. One reason may have been that it would have been quite difficult and embarrassing to do; I was not on probation as I had been at the Ministry of Overseas Development. But there were better reasons. When I had to deal with stressful situations involving staff, I often stammered just as I had done in the civil service. But these situations were rare. Mostly I worked either where there was little necessity to talk, or on the enquiry desk, which almost always I enjoyed. Here I felt I was acting. I was not the “real Ford”; I was an official helping the public. I was also unfailingly, and I think to some of my colleagues, quite frighteningly, polite. If I occasionally became involved, usually against my will, in a more lengthy and personal conversation with a client, my stammer began to return. All this may explain why I never gained any further promotion. I was much happier when I began to understand this. Also, it helped that everybody knew I would not be competing for any more senior position they wanted. I was, in fact, an exception to Parkinson’s law. I fear few fellow stammerers have much to learn from this, except that it’s better not to aspire to jobs you can’t do, but only – and this is very important – if you’re really sure you can’t do them. This of course is a general rule, applicable to everybody, whether a stammerer or not. And if you’re thinking of going to law to protest about not being hired, or being sacked, because of your stammer, make sure you really feel you could do the job. If you are reasonably sure, go ahead, making sure the British Stammering Association knows about it. They will unfailingly support you if you need help.

Life then became tougher in a different way with the increasing decline in my parents’ health. My father had had a heart attack in 1982 from which he seemingly recovered very quickly, but by about 1988 he was showing increasing signs of senility. My mother, always naturally melancholy, found this very hard to bear, though she cared valiantly for my father and indeed did not much like anyone else caring for him. I spent more and more time with them, something which it was dangerously easy to do because I had no closer family to stop me. I seemed to spend most of my time whizzing around the underground system, from work – at Marylebone – to my parents – at Wimbledon - and then back to my flat, which unfortunately was not on the underground system and needed a long journey either on a train to Peckham Rye or a 63 bus from the Elephant and Castle tube station. I began to know the bus stop there very well. At least all this travelling showed me how very many Londoners really lived and how London was changing very quickly into a multiracial city.

I quite enjoyed my enforced tube travelling. I didn’t have to talk and I could read. Ideally I read poetry. The more divorced from real life the poetry seemed to be, the better it was for me. That word “seemed” is important. Browning’s *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came* seemed more relevant every time I read it, as every day I knew there was some sort of dark tower ahead of me even though my fears about what might be inside it varied from day to day. Hence, of course, the value of symbolism; Browning’s poem is as good a symbolist poem as any French symbolist ever wrote. What I needed were slim volumes that I could carry easily in my pocket. Selected poets were best although one should always remember that one man’s selection is somebody else’s dog’s breakfast. One of the best Shelley selections unaccountably leaves out *The Witch of Atlas*. My teacher and friend Harry Guest’s poetry was much read at about this time, and not just because his paperbacks are a convenient size. I owe my former schoolfellow Peter Jay a

debt of gratitude for publishing them as part of his *Anvil Press* list. I recommend *Lost and Found* as a good individual volume to start with. And then there are wonderful Victor Hugo translations in Guest's book *The Distance, The Shadows!* If anyone – it seems unlikely in this age – wants to discover what the word pastoral really means and cannot read French, reading Harry Guest's translation of Hugo's poem *Booz Endormi* is the answer. Reading the opening chapters of George Eliot's *Adam Bede* as an entrée might just be the icing on the cake.

Then another blow – though really quite a mild blow – fell. Westminster Library's staff was completely reorganised and my job came under threat. We all, according to the custom of the time, had to be re-interviewed to decide if we could keep our jobs. I learnt many years later after retirement that there never had been any intention of dismissing me, but of course I did not know this at the time. At my actual interview I'd just been caught in a storm, and water was pouring off my trousers onto the floor, dampening the chair for the next interviewee. In fact almost all of those who left around this time, including Gordon Eynon who had been so kind to me years before, were administrators who were deemed to be much less important than those like me who worked on the "front line", to use a ludicrous expression becoming increasingly fashionable then. (An even more ludicrous expression, the "coal face" is fashionable now among humourless people.) My failure to gain promotion had almost become my salvation. There was one problem; to fit me in as a part-timer after the reorganisation I had to work at two libraries, Queens Park and Paddington (again). They were fairly close to each other, joined by a number 18 bus ride, but a long way from my flat and even further from my parents' house. Then my father died, quite suddenly. To care for my mother I decided very quickly and under a lot of pressure from no one but myself, to sleep at her house two nights a week and from May 1993 to June 1995 when she died I zoomed around London even more. Yet more of my reading was done on underground trains and buses. I wrote a very short poem, mainly about this, called *The Stopgap*. A stopgap was what I really felt I was. I knew, of course, that stopgaps are not always replaced.

Something very odd happened at about this time, and it happened surprisingly quickly, in a matter of just a few weeks. Suddenly women seemed to like and trust me much more than before. They didn't roll over when they saw me – far from it – but they seemed more interested in me. I certainly hadn't become more handsome: rather the reverse. They listened to what I said more carefully, and did not, as many had done, judge me instantly on the basis of my stammer. Why did this happen? I have no idea.

Before his death my father's health had gradually declined in a way I found difficult to accept. His sudden death was unusual and very upsetting for my mother, and indeed for me and my brother. Several times he had left the house and roamed around London, always in the end returning safely, though not before causing my mother very great anxiety. On one occasion he ended up somewhere a long way off in north London, and had the sense to enter a police station, whence he was brought home in a police car. Then finally he strolled out one day, unnoticed by my mother, and ended up at Embankment Gardens next to Embankment tube station, where he collapsed and died of a heart attack. He had left with no money on him, so had he walked all the way there – he was certainly exhausted when he arrived – or taken a train in to Waterloo from Wimbledon? He could easily have walked through the train barriers at each end of the line without being challenged. All this happened on a Friday, and the 28 or so hours between his disappearance and confirmation that his body was in St Thomas's Hospital was definitely the worst family experience of my life. On the Saturday evening a female police officer called at my mother's house in Wimbledon and asked for a photograph of my father. She was

thoughtful and discreet; she said nothing when a photo was shown her, but the expression on her face was enough. Luckily my mother did not see it.

Dealing with his death was complicated. There were all his books and papers to be considered. I did little till my mother died two years later for fear of hurting her feelings. His large collection of Chinese and Vietnamese books, which to my shame I couldn't read, I gave to the School of Oriental and African Studies library. His financial affairs were in outline simple but in detail complicated, as in his last years he had taken to using share certificates as bookmarks. Gradually all the financial problems were sorted out, mainly by my very competent brother, who is a qualified chartered accountant. Many of his English language books I kept, and pretty well all his papers and incoming correspondence. There was a problem storing these in my flat, but they were very useful when I came to write my little biography of him some years later.

After my father's death I almost always telephoned my mother once a day, and there were few days when I didn't see her or sleep in her house. Sometimes one of those days was when I had to work a 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. shift, mainly at Queens Park library. For some reason I used to travel back to my flat breaking my journey at Piccadilly Circus tube station to eat a cheap meal at an Italian restaurant in Denman Street nearby. This was my little treat to which I looked forward the whole day; work at Queens Park library was often dull because deserving as many of the poorer readers were, you got very few interesting enquiries. In fact many of the people were more interesting than the enquiries. There was also a problem with the telephone box just outside the library constantly being vandalised; I suspect the vandals may have been in league with the company who regularly came to repair it. I loved my little treat, but also thought of my mother at home by herself, lonely and bereft of my father whom she loved so dearly. Since her death I have found it very hard to walk down Denman Street.

It is a fine Thursday in July 1994. I have just had a late breakfast at my mother's house in Wimbledon but must be at Queens Park Library to begin a shift at midday. I take a 93 bus to the south end of Putney Bridge and walk along the Thames towpath to Hammersmith to continue my onward journey. On my right are the beautiful if somewhat unkempt gardens of Fulham Palace. (They are much more kempt now.) On my left oarsmen, mostly single scullers, flow past. Across the river I can see the various boathouses of famous London rowing clubs. (My nephew's wedding reception will take place at one.) It is an absolutely gorgeous day, aeons away from my world of duty, my world of library enquiry desks and sleeping in a house where I constantly worry whether my mother will be taken ill when I'm in bed. I know at Hammersmith all this will end, even though there will probably be time for a tapas snack at a Spanish restaurant then resident in the tube station. The Crabtree pub passes by on my right, where there is no time for a drink. Would I enjoy this wonderful workless world more if I lived in it all the time? And – I don't forget this – many have no time for such a walk as this.

Mixed in with all this alloyed gloom was a strange event in my life which in the end I much enjoyed. Just before my father died, out of devilry I decided I would go in for *Mastermind*, a television quiz show where time-limited questions are thrown at you by – in those days – a benevolent and avuncular quizmaster called Magnus Magnusson. By this time I had begun to work an hour or two a week at the recently founded British Stammering Association, and they certainly encouraged me to take part. Severe or variable stammering is very rarely seen or heard on the television or radio, and I suspect they secretly hoped I might remedy this, although not to the extent of performing really badly. But my real reason for behaving so rashly was vanity, a desire to show I could survive doing something which anyone might agree was pretty stressful, to use a word which has become very fashionable in my lifetime. (Comedians have missed a

trick here: they could write a sketch where the Duke of Wellington calls the battle of Waterloo “stressful”.) I chose – of course – Shelley as my subject for the first round, and Jim Crossland kindly let me spend a solitary weekend at his Hampshire retreat revising. I spent most of the weekend reading Shelley’s complete poetry and Newman Ivey White’s classic biography, together with Frederick Jones’s very fine edition of his letters. Both of these scholars are, not coincidentally, Americans. It was amazing how boring all these books become when read in such a context. I felt so glad I had not read English literature at university.

On the allotted day in January 1993, things did not start well, as my increasingly senile father suddenly decided he would walk from Wimbledon to a garage in Morden to discuss the servicing of his car, and I decided I must follow him to make sure he returned safely. I felt very guilty at having to return and travel to Arundel for the programme before he had been tracked down and returned, although the garage staff promised he would come to no harm.

All ended well however, and by the early afternoon I arrived at Arundel Castle just in time for the rehearsal, which was indeed very scary. This took place in the baronial hall, and to say that I felt exposed is putting it mildly. I’m sure over a hundred people were staring at me and I answered few questions correctly. Fortunately the actual recording went a lot better. Everything then was in darkness except Magnus Magnusson’s face. I seemed to know the answers to many more questions than in the rehearsal, though not remembering the name of Shelley’s Neapolitan charge was a little shameful. After the second general knowledge round I ended second out of four, so did not pass beyond the first round and therefore missed the semi-final scheduled for Bath, where my cousin Margaret could have come to watch me. I also felt confident that Charles Lamb would at least have not disgraced me as my second special subject. Still, I felt that honour had been satisfied. Afterwards Magnus Magnusson told me he thought my stammer had cost me 2 points. The winner beat me by 3 points. But it was a high scoring round, and also the winner, a lady who knew a frightening amount about the siege of Paris in 1870, had received far more make-up time than me, surely a deciding factor.

The reactions of friends and colleagues to this were interesting. I think many were embarrassed. Quite a few of my friends felt it was not quite the right thing to enter a competition like this, but found it difficult to explain why. In some obscure way I feel the English class system is a factor here, but cannot be more precise about the reasons. Colleagues at work were more enthusiastic. Every year, Westminster Libraries holds its own inter-branch general knowledge competition, and I was expected to shine in this for whatever library I represented. I did not always fulfil these expectations. As many have observed, television fame does not last long. My performance was broadcast in April. The day after, a pretty waitress in a Bethnal Green café congratulated me and offered me a coffee on the house. After that, to this day, nothing until, many years later, I returned to Arundel Castle.

My father’s death, and my mother’s two years later in 1995, were a warning signal; I was now trundling downhill to oblivion, and the only uncertain thing was the speed of the descent. A blunt friend told me I was now at the top of the staircase. There were compensations. My remaining family became more important. I had always got on well with Richard, my brother, and his wife Jennifer whom he had married in 1966. But relations had been somewhat anodyne and distant, although I think I was reliable enough in matters such as their children’s birthdays. Then, after my father’s death, an unpleasant row erupted about care for my mother. I think my decision to sleep in her house 2 nights a week was what began this. Of course I never suggested nor indeed felt that my brother did the same, but I did suggest that when my mother spent every fourth Sunday at his house in Barnes he might sometimes take her out for a drive. As I did not

drive I could not do this myself. My sister-in-law was angered by this, and both she and my cousin Margaret wrote to me saying I was far too dependent on my mother and that it would be better to put her into a home.

I didn't agree. My mother would I am sure have been very unhappy in a home, and far from being dependent on her I would have loved to live a more independent life a little more distant from her which would have been possible had she been a different person. Indeed, when she died in June 1995 I was very relieved, although this was at least partly because she was finally free of the pain and depression she was suffering from and had indeed suffered from for some years even before my father died. Caring for him had been exhausting for her, but she was determined to do it. I have written about this not to criticise my relations, who I am sure were trying to cope with a difficult situation as best they could, but to show how hard it is to deal with a problem such as this. Some families break up because of this problem. Ours did not. I am not my mother's son for nothing, and can often feel her melancholy inside me. So far I have fought it much more successfully than she did. My friend Richard Filleul thought that her lack of any kind of job – jobs were forbidden to the wives of diplomats in those days – may have at least partially caused her sadness. Quite possibly he was right.

My cousin Margaret, despite this disagreement, was very helpful, several times inviting my mother down to her house in Saltford during this period, so I could spend the occasional holiday out of London. One holiday, entirely on my own, was spent at a mysteriously cheap house on the beach near Fleet, a few miles away to the west of Weymouth. Another holiday was a week away at Blakeney on the north Norfolk coast. I walked a lot around the area, including a splendid hike to Little Walsingham, and another along the sands to Wells-next-the-Sea. There are many wonderful churches in this area: Salthouse comes to mind, with a splendid view over the sea from the churchyard. Many of these areas are depopulated, and what will happen to these wonderful buildings is a real problem for those of us – a majority of the population? – who believe nothing happens after death except decomposition.

I'm visiting my friend Tony Dunigan in his Bromley flat just before he upped sticks and moved to Oulton near Lowestoft in Suffolk to be near his elderly mother. There's a wonderful linocut of his, of Hales church in Norfolk in his flat. There is no better lino cutter in England than Tony. The cumulus clouds above the church with its medieval lookout tower billow and writhe in a superb symbolic enactment of all our contemporary troubles. I buy it and with Valerie's help – very much see below about her – take it home in her car. I can see it on my wall as I type. I feel with that watchtower attached to the church Viking longships cannot be far away.

Margaret's helpfulness was extremely typical of her. She possessed a rare sensitive stoicism, much helped by a Christian faith unusual in our age. In 1963 her husband had died young after only nine years of marriage, and before that she had given birth to three still-born children. Never once did I hear her complain about this in words or in any other way. Her cheerfulness was the natural cheerfulness of a happy Christian woman, but there were hidden depths underneath this of which few knew. For about the last twenty years of her life I spent a day or two with her about three or four times a year, later on often with Valerie until her Parkinson's made visiting for her difficult. We usually drove to a country house or garden to look around, or attended concerts given by the Bristol Bach Choir, in which her godson David Parfrey – she had many godchildren – usually sang. Mostly – and shamefully – I resented the idea of going down by train to Bath to see her. I always changed my mind when I arrived. In the evenings we used to sit and talk in her dining room with the sun declining over the golf course beyond her garden hedge. We might discuss her many visits to New Zealand where she had worked for some years as a

housemistress in a girls' school in Auckland, or maybe our shared family history, or maybe simply sat in silence. It did not matter.

It's a cold autumn evening, and Margaret drives me to Wells Cathedral where we hear the Bristol Bach Choir perform Bach's B Minor Mass with some really excellent musicians they've hired to accompany them. We're in the front row of the nave surrounded by the wonders of the cathedral which to some extent reflect back in stone and wood the subtle vagaries of Bach's mind. Like Shakespeare, like Mozart, he always outthinks you. If you find you've caught up with him, then probably – certainly – you've missed something. And all this happens before you begin to feel!

That holiday in Blakeney boomeranged back at me very unpleasantly. I caught chickenpox during it, and had therefore to take a further fortnight off work after my week away. I have never – so far – felt so ill as during the first few days of my illness. I could not visit my mother, but after a few days indoors I was able to stagger along to the Horniman Museum park a mile or so away and hide myself away in a remote corner without hopefully being seen. At one point lying in bed during an endlessly hot afternoon, I turned on the radio for a performance of Cesar Franck's only symphony. Poor Cesar Franck! I have always found it difficult to listen to it, but not him, since.

During my enforced exile away from visiting my mother Catherine Ebenezer, referred to elsewhere, stepped into the breach and visited her at least once if not twice. Her unusual surname reveals an interesting Welsh background; her father had been a Welshman who emigrated to England and became a primary school headmaster. She was a keen hiker and usually outwalked me on several of the walks we embarked on. One particular walk stays in my mind; a long foray along the north edges of the South Downs where we trespassed in the park of Wiston House, a government estate much used for official conferences. Almost certainly cameras tracked us as we walked along. Nothing happened. I can only conclude that neither of us looked like spies.

It is December 31st 1993. I have been asked to a performance of Johann Strauss's Die Fledermaus at the English National Opera and enjoy it far more than I had expected. When I was young I had disliked operettas, probably because my parents adored them and occasionally dragged me along. I still remember my terror when the pictures in Gilbert and Sullivan's Ruddigore walked out of their frames and onto the stage. There is a very late supper afterwards with friends to celebrate the holiday, but sadly I feel I must return home to be with my mother in Wimbledon. When I enter the drawing-room she is waiting up for me and breaks down and cries in my arms. She longs for me, of course, but even more for my dead father. However different I am from my mother – and I am certainly very different in many ways – we both certainly possess the gift and curse of being able to fall irredeemingly, not to say obsessively, in love, however impossible and hopeless that love might be. Even now I can hear her saying, of my father: "How I wish he was coming through that door." In life they often had quite severe disagreements, but that counted for nothing now. Did my mother deceive herself, pretending her marriage had always been idyllic? I don't think so. Many people I know are puzzled by Shakespeare's praise of unconditional love in his sonnets. There are many other things in them I find difficult, but not that. And the only poem Shakespeare undoubtedly wrote in the first person and approved for publication, called by us today "The Phoenix and the Turtle", is helpful here.

My sister-in-law Jennifer and I survived our disagreement over my mother's care, and in the end we became even closer than before. Slowly I grew nearer to both to her and my cousin Margaret and I often accompanied Jennifer to concerts and art galleries. And – slowly too – I became interested in my nephew and niece and in time in their children. All this is very banal stuff, of

course, but it was not banal for me. I'd thought that I was destined never to have a family. This proved to be untrue; in fact I got a lot of the pleasure of having one with – so far – shouldering hardly any of the responsibilities. I would I am sure have been a terrible father, constantly worrying about my children's future and interfering irritatingly in their activities. Watching – I hope – at a tactful distance how my nephew and niece – and their children - coped with being parents has been an education for me.

Two friends were stalwart in calling on my mother after my father died. One was Stella Leigh. As I was – I think sensibly – rarely present during her visits, I'll never know whether any secrets about me were given away. If they were, Stella has been discreet. The other, mentioned above, was Catherine Ebenezer, who sometimes visited my mother even when I was not struck down by chickenpox. When I stayed again at St. Nicholas in Pembrokeshire with her and another friend, Margaret Kirkby, she insisted on walking by herself right around Strumble Head and quite a bit further. I was gently hurt at the time by this, but think on reflection she was right in what she did; I could not easily have walked as far as this and she deserved what I often had: a day of solitary musings without interruption.

Once Catherine and I attended a concert at Rangers House in Greenwich Park, consisting entirely of works by Beethoven in sonata form. Probably they were three of his piano trios. Although I think she enjoyed the concert, she remarked afterwards that three such works in sonata form in a row were a bit much. Indeed I think she found sonata form itself a trifle tedious. For me, who doted on anything written that way and could easily have listened to whole days of such pieces without flinching, this was a shock. But it was a salutary shock. Perhaps her invitation to a service at St Alban's, Holborn full of pre-classical music was a kind of gentle very unconscious revenge. I did not object to the experience, but I have never repeated it.

This sort of music – Sweelinck is a wonderful exponent of it – is a mystery to me. To my mind it is entirely tuneless and is stuffed full of counterpoint. (Is "stuffed" a judgmental word that I should not have used?) What evidence we have of secular music written at the same time suggests it is completely different. Why do so many people feel this style is right for sacred music, even when they don't believe in Christianity? Is it just acceptance by association? I feel there is something deeper here, something from which I am excluded by my lack of religious faith. I should add that Catherine is very definitely a Christian.

This lack of faith did not disturb me much when I was young. I was and am glad I was taught so much about Christianity by my teachers at Lancing and do not regret all those services in Lancing College Chapel, possibly because I was usually looking forward to the director of music, John Alston, playing Bach preludes and fugues on the organ at the end. But doctrinal acceptance was different. I occasionally felt a sort of exhilaration at being different during those services. Till quite recently I even felt empowered by the feeling that I could not know how much time was left before I died. Now that time is much shorter, I feel sad about things I cannot do. If, as Hamlet opined, "the rest is silence", non-existence would be intolerable; but I believe there is no silence after death, because there is no consciousness. Perhaps of course Hamlet meant that it was *his* survivors who would have to endure *his* silence. It is always dangerous to underrate Shakespeare.

Catherine was a remarkably assertive driver for someone who seemed on the surface such a mild person. On one occasion, I think after work, she drove me tolerably quickly to Haslemere for a concert in the village hall. I can't remember what was played; the event was part of the Haslemere festival started by Arnold Dolmetsch in 1925. But Catherine's swift but safe lifts

there and back stay in my mind. We just reached the start of the concert in time, and I was not particularly late for bed. Until they died my parents' house in Wimbledon was a very convenient resting place after events such as this.

There was one other person I saw a bit more of in those years just before and after my parents' death: my godmother, Enid Cross or "Auntie Enid", as I called her. She had been my mother's best friend as a schoolgirl way back at Barnstaple Grammar School in the 1920s. She told me that her very conservative and prosperous father, a butcher, refused to pay for any further education for her until my grandfather went to see him and told him to his face this was wrong. He gave way, and Auntie Enid trained successfully as a pharmacist. Of course attending a university would have been even better. Their friendship lasted despite my mother's many postings abroad with my father, and my mother's letters to her, which she gave me before her death, were a valuable source when I wrote a memoir of him. For a few years both before and after my mother's death I went down every few months to Barnstaple to see her. We got on well on the surface. A cab driver she habitually used, confusingly like me called John, drove us around the area to different places for lunch, and there was a memorable lunch at a pub at Instow where a bridegroom carried his new wife through the pouring rain to a horse and carriage to begin their honeymoon. But I think deeper down she was saddened by my inability to believe in the Christianity which was her bedrock.

She was a West Country woman at heart, and had never lived further away than Taunton. She told me many stories about my mother's family, some of which I hope aren't true. After a telephone conversation with my mother, she decided to leave me no money in her will as she knew I would be reasonably well provided for by my parents. I was hurt; I did not want her money, but a small sum – say £500 - would have reassured me of her affection for me. Here I was wrong; the charities she supported needed her money more than me. Wills often cause disaffection inside families, particularly among those who, often wrongly, feel left out. Near her end she tried out various care homes in turn, and on one occasion only a fortunate phone call – she had a mobile phone amazingly early - led me to the right place. When I arrived, she was sitting in a big reception room with a crowd of other inmates. She struggled up when she saw me approaching and said loudly: "How nice of you to come, John, but please don't think I'm leaving you anything in my will." Some of her fellow inmates looked at me rather oddly.

I would have liked to leave this gentle but intrepid woman with this joke, but her end was sad. She ended up in a care home on Sticklepath Hill in Barnstaple and when she became immobile and speechless was moved to a home at Westward Ho! intended for those suffering more intensively. Near the very end I visited her there and stayed the night in a very forlorn pub in the dead of winter. I've no idea if she could understand what I was saying, and my inevitable stammer in such a situation did not help. Even in the middle of winter a few dedicated souls were surfing in what seemed to me to be a tremendous wind. Surely not even the north coast of Kamchatka, I thought, could be as forsaken as this! Particularly melancholy was the presence of many uninhabited summer dwellings. I returned to London feeling, as I almost always did, guilty at leaving someone whom I could not really help. One regret was that I never met her husband, who had been a pilot in the war and whose life must have been very fascinating. He died young, weakened, as my godmother thought, by what he had endured during the war. She felt, I suspect rightly, that the Royal Air Force had been unnecessarily grudging in paying him compensation afterwards.

It is some years later, in 2006. Valerie, for some years now my friend and partner, has driven me southwest from Melbourne along the Great Ocean Road to Apollo Bay, a seaside resort fronting

on the Bass Strait. It is September, the tail end of winter in those parts. A charming Greek couple puts us up in their bed and breakfast hotel. After dark I walk out slowly along the road, rising ground to my right and the sea to my left beyond some rocks. Very occasional house lights pass me by. This is worse than Westward Ho! A few waves of a malevolent magic wand, and I might be the only person in the world struggling along a windswept desolate coast. It is the complete antithesis of Mumbai. I wonder where those First World War veterans slept when they built this road in the 1920s.

The train journeys to and from Barnstaple from London were adventures in themselves. In theory you changed at Exeter St. David's station for the Tarka Line up to Barnstaple, and very beautiful the scenery was if you made it this far, especially nearer Barnstaple where the track follows the valley of the river Taw. But quite often this didn't happen. The train was often delayed, usually after Newbury, and sometimes actually broke down. Then Somerset's efficient taxi service swung into action, usually at Taunton. At the Great Western Railway's expense I was driven along the North Devon relief road all the way to Auntie Enid's flat in Barum Court near the railway station. The service I believe is better now but considerably less exciting. On one occasion a ticket inspector told me that a G.W.R. director by chance on the train was hiding in a toilet to avoid a confrontation with angry passengers.

These journeys would have been even more fun had slip coaches still existed. When my mother was at Reading University, she could travel direct back to her parents in Barnstaple by means of such a coach that left the moving train between Taunton and Exeter to take the branch line there. Once she forgot to sit in the end coach as she was talking to friends and trolled on to Exeter. In a panic she phoned her father. Luckily there was a late train to Barnstaple on what is now the Tarka Line that she could catch.

At about this time my brother and sister-in-law decided to move – down to Dorking where their son Simon had moved a year or two previously. They sold their house in Barnes and bought a much bigger place on the Deepdene estate on Dorking's west side. This estate was built in the park of Deepdene House, sold for development I think after the First World War. There was a beautiful house, with a big garden which gave Jennifer the chance at last to do the gardening she loved and became expert at. There was a mysterious atmosphere about it which reminded me a little of my parents' superficially quite different house in Wimbledon. Once or twice I spent the day with my brother, and as night fell in the early winter evenings a kind of magic descended on the view across the road towards the west. The Deepdene estate is an almost perfect example of how most English people would like to live if they could afford to: houses well apart, large gardens, and shops not much more than half a mile away in the centre of Dorking, plus a possible, if rather slow, train service up to London. The houses were obviously individually designed by architects: not perhaps architects as famous as Lutyens or Curtis Green, but still proper architects.

I therefore expected these houses to be mentioned in the Surrey volume of the Buildings of England, the series started by Nikolaus Pevsner in the 1950s. Ian Nairn wrote most of this volume and it is one of the best in the whole series. But I was wrong. The history of Deepdene House was described, and rightly, even though the house, designed in the Regency period for the art collector Thomas Hope, was pulled down in 1967. But Nairn – or Pevsner himself? – ignored the new houses built between the two world wars.

A lengthy essay could be written about this, but I'll confine myself to a few sentences. So often in life a small number of influential people try, often unconsciously, to compel the majority to

adopt their views on a certain matter. Sometimes this works and they are right: the attitudes behind the reforms of the homosexuality laws, unpopular as they may have been when they were adopted, have now seeped through society and have changed, in my view rightly, how we see such matters. But this did not happen when capital punishment was abolished; opinion polls show many people, probably still a majority, oppose its abolition. Nor do people want to live in the sort of buildings so much loved by many professional architects, and views have not changed since the war. They want more Deepdene estates. Will this change soon? I doubt it. The reasons why not are many, and I suspect already covered in many books which I have not read. Money is certainly the main one; England's chronic overpopulation another one. If we all lived in estates like Deepdene a lot of land would be used up.

Sometime after I'd read William Morris's *Erewhon* I had a curious lengthy dream about England. Mysteriously, the population had grown much smaller. The only buildings were country houses, all a few miles apart and sometimes surrounded by a few smaller houses or one-storey apartments for single people. Roads did exist for the supply of food and other essentials, but flying was banned except for helicopters to ferry seriously ill people to hospitals. I hadn't thought of schools or universities in my dream. Perhaps everyone survived on private tutoring.

My sister-in-law died in March 2019. I used to visit my brother at Deepdene every fortnight or so after that. We'd have a picnic lunch and then sit and chat as the darkness gradually drew in. As we sat there looking out at the beautiful garden she had created I often felt feelings of gloom best depicted in Hardy's poems and in a few – a very few – of Parry's songs, where we are in a world very far away from *At a Solemn Music* or *Jerusalem*. His setting of George Meredith's poem *Dirge in Woods* is a wonderful example of this, a superb specimen of Victorian pessimism – and Meredith lived just down the road from Deepdene in Mickleham. But, most of the time, I found something exhilarating about this pessimism. I felt, quite wrongly of course, that I was starting to plumb the depths of human sadness.

It's an interesting reflection of human feelings that there is no word in English with a meaning opposite to haunt. If there were, it would describe how my friendship with David Hay-Edie, described above, developed over the years. His life as a diplomat necessitated his absence abroad for many years, and indeed at one point my need to care for my parents meant I had to refuse an invitation to stay with him in Oslo, something I much regret. Then he was transferred to Geneva, and I made three very brief visits to see him there between 1990 and 1992. The contrast with my life in London was immense. Partly because Elaine did not seem to want to travel abroad I had not been out of England, apart from my trip to Ireland with her, for nine years. On my first visit I had to change trains in Paris before taking a TGV to Geneva, and Paris really did seem extremely foreign. When I arrived in Geneva my train arrived early and I had a cup of coffee whilst waiting for David and his wife Silviane. The cost was such that I wondered how I could survive my four days' stay. In fact my hosts were very tactful; they found the cheapest possible restaurant when I foolishly insisted on buying them a meal. Two expeditions from those visits stand out. One was a trip to Martigny, quite a long car ride beyond the east end of Lake Geneva and up into the Alps, where there is an excellent art gallery containing some intriguing works by Picasso, intriguing even though he is far from being my favourite painter. There are also fascinating Roman ruins there. Silviane's brother Pado was and is a very interesting sculptor, and we dined one evening at his villa on the northern shores of the lake, surrounded by a vineyard owned by his family. These trips were full of nostalgia for me, reminding me of the holidays on the continent in my youth with my parents. They made me feel guilty; what had I done to deserve them? I was learning that a Puritan core in me approved of my not very well-

paid job in not enormously pleasant London surroundings. I felt, quite possibly wrongly, that I was learning more about England than other schoolfellows who had stayed within the confines of their own class.

I'm flying home from Geneva in 1992 after my third and last visit. Suddenly, after extraordinary views of the Alps subside into the central French plain, a harsh feeling of foreboding descends into me. Neither of my parents is very well. When I return, care responsibilities will tread down on to me remorselessly. When I reach Heathrow I'm stopped by a customs officer and searched very thoroughly for contraband that I do not possess. I ask him politely why he chose me for this treatment but, of course, he refuses to say. Is it the worried expression on my face? More likely it is my vain attempt to rush through the airport so as to arrive at my mother's in time. I travel to Wimbledon feeling gloomier and gloomier.

David Hay-Edie was kind to me in another way. Immediately after my mother died he asked me to Paris, where he was working in the British embassy on UNESCO matters. He had a wonderful flat a few yards from the Place Victor Hugo in the 16th arrondissement, and both then and for a few years later I enjoyed the shock of exploring Paris after many years absence from it. At that time Paris was much in advance of London in new building projects, which varied in quality but were all worth seeing. A scary lift at La Defense with a glass floor sticks in the memory. But what I liked best were the smaller art galleries which in my youthful ignorance I had never troubled to see before. The Musee Jacquemart-Andre with its unusual Watteau comes to mind. Watteau is not perhaps a very great painter like Raphael or Turner, but he is my favourite, or perhaps my joint favourite with Palmer. They both depict with consummate skill unreal worlds, and unreal worlds that superficially seem very unlike each other. But look more closely, and they are brothers in delightful deception. Both are experts in the depiction of melancholy, Palmer through landscape and Watteau in his drawings of beautiful girls, made even more beautiful – O so subtly! - through his delicate draughtsmanship. Would they have hated each other? I think at a dinner party, helped by wine, a shy friendship would have emerged. I would like to have been the host. Finding acceptable food, liked by both, would have been the problem. And Watteau is a wonderful example of a painter much indebted in technique to a painter who in feeling he does not resemble at all. I mean Rubens.

But the real pleasure of Paris lies in wandering around never being quite sure what you will find next. And then there was the food. Not far from David's apartment, and surprisingly near the Arc de Triomphe, there was a tiny Spanish restaurant down a side street which served wonderful paella. Long conversations there and elsewhere with David have been one of the great pleasures of my life. And once or twice Valerie came over too. Meeting her at the Gare du Nord was peaceful and comforting.

I've travelled to St. Germain-en-Laye in search of the Debussy museum where the composer was brought up. After relishing the view down onto the Seine from the terrace designed by Le Notre I walk into the town looking for it in vain. In the end, discouraged, I enter a bar where asking a waiter leads to an intense discussion between several elderly men about where it is. In the end a silent elderly lady gestures to me and whispers precise and accurate directions. She gazes at the men with contempt. I slip out. My quest ends disappointingly. As so often happens in such places, nothing is left of Debussy's spirit in the house. I suspect he wanted to leave as soon as he could.

I have never lost touch with David. After retiring from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office he moved to France, near the Swiss border so he could easily visit his sick wife in Geneva. For a

time after that he lived in a beautiful villa near Annecy before finally settling in Grenoble. Visits to him were always full of novel – for me – meals in restaurants, walks in mountain scenery and above all, chat. On one occasion with no warning at all we bearded the writer John Berger in his mountain lair and enjoyed breakfast with him. If he was upset by our crude intrusion he gave no sign of it.

Once again I've just arrived at Geneva airport. I feel little spurts of worry: will David be at the airport? He is. And from the moment I catch sight of him and we begin to talk our friendship rears up out of the ground like a huge miraculous mushroom. The conversational exchanges are swift and – I think, I really do think – thoughtful. David eases the car out of the Geneva airport car park. Soon we reach the French border and the familiar Alpine ranges stand up before me. Here I am in a different world: so far from London. I'd hate to live here permanently, but what fun to be here for a few days! And at his home, there is the prospect of a delicious cheese fondue before bedtime.

On one occasion David drove us to Evian-les-Bains, a resort on the south side of Lake Geneva, where we saw a superb exhibition about the work of Jean Cocteau. I remembered being played a recording at school where Cocteau started a talk with the word “spectateurs” spoken in a way inimitable even by a Frenchman. There was lunch in a café overlooking the lake. Somewhere nearby Alphonse de Lamartine is supposed to have written his poem *Le Lac*. Why are such rare days perfect even though no particular moment in them is?

Other holidays continued in England, but always Elaine's absence remained like a gloomy mountain in my mind, and often when friends joined me I was much less appreciative of their company than I should have been. One woman in particular, Catherine Ebenezer, mentioned above, was very kind to me and also to my mother. Another new friend, Margaret Adolphus (now Kirkby) and she joined me on two holidays, one in Pembrokeshire and another at Stanhope in County Durham in 1990. I remember this holiday in particular for a trip to Barnard Castle, where we wandered around the Bowes Museum on an unseasonably hot day. I spent the whole of that day worrying whether my parents could successfully endure the heat. They could and did.

It is August 1st, 1990. We're walking somewhere on the County Durham/Yorkshire border on a steamingly hot day. A military warplane streaks noisily overhead. The Berlin wall's fall is a little over 6 months in the past. One of us says, and we all think: "How strange! Maybe we'll never need such ugly structures again." The following day Saddam Husain invades Kuwait.

I missed a trick on that holiday. At my prep school, Downside, I had been taught by a wonderful County Durham man, Derrick Herdman, who was a brilliant choirmaster and trained the Downside School choir up to the highest Anglican cathedral standards. Once, just after I'd left Downside, my parents had asked him to a Mozart concert at the Royal Festival Hall. During our drive up to the Festival Hall he remarked that although Mozart was obviously a great composer, he found his works less appealing the older he got. I've never forgotten what he said, and have wanted for many years to discuss this with him. To put it mildly, I've never felt this. But discussing such differences in feeling with a sympathetic friend can often be surprisingly productive, and often in very unexpected ways. Such talks often shed unexpected light on a quite different author or composer neither of you had begun by thinking about.

I never succeeded in discussing Mozart or anything else with Derrick, and the reason was simple: I lost touch with him. The fault was mine, and I still regret it. Had I known it, at Stanhope we were only a few miles away in Catherine Ebenezer's car from Romalldkirk where he lived. I

don't think he would have minded our asking him out to tea, and would not have regarded this as an infliction. But at that time of my life I had pushed memories of my education as far back into my mind as I could, because I was ashamed at my lack of worldly success. I don't think Mr Herdman, as I always had called him, would have thought about this at all. The same applied to another master at Downside, Basil Dowling, a gifted poet who first introduced me to poetry, who had retired to Rye in 1975. Once Elaine and I had visited Rye for a weekend in 1982. Of course I failed to contact him.

But then two things happened, the first enormously important and the second an enormous wonderful cherry on what seemed then to be the top of a dull uncompromising seed cake.

The first event was meeting Valerie, now my wife. The fact that this is her real name tells the reader that she is still with me, and that I quite rightly have no need nor desire to write anything very critical about her. This is because although like everyone she has a few faults, they are considerably less than mine and liveable with, just as – I hope – mine are. Indeed I often wonder how anyone can possibly live with me, but that is a story for others to write. We insinuated ourselves into each other's lives slowly, and indeed it was quite a long time before I realised what was happening. By this time (1994) Sam Tanner and I had drifted into organising walks at roughly monthly intervals, which anyone could attend, invited by any member of our extremely informal group. Sam, with his wife Jutta, had and has been a most constant friend since we first met in 1970, and these walks formed the cement in the firm but gentle wall of our friendship. Valerie sometimes came along. I knew who she was because I had seen her at a mutual friend's party, but had never managed to speak to her. Our first formal date, in October 1994, was a concert at Southwark Cathedral at which Sir Hubert Parry's *Blest Pair of Sirens* was sung. Or was it *I Was Glad*? Other things were on my mind. Valerie will never be far away during the rest of this memoir, even though I may not often refer to her. It is a sadness to me that although she once met my mother – very briefly at her home in Wimbledon and once on her deathbed - she never met my father, whom I think she would have much liked.

That reference above to Hubert Parry was not meant to be dismissive. He is a much underrated composer, although his compositions do vary greatly in quality. His *Symphonic Variations* are nearly as good as Elgar's *Enigma Variations* and could well be performed as a prelude to them at a Promenade Concert. His setting of William Dunbar's *Ode on the Nativity* is a wonderful piece perhaps handicapped by the fact that there is only one solo part, for soprano, competing against a chorus and orchestra. Dunbar's poem is certainly better than Milton's on the same subject. Finally some, but not all, of his songs are as good as anything by Schubert. His setting of some of Mary Coleridge's poems makes her poetry seem as good as Hardy's which, of course, it quite often is.

I wish that Valerie *had* met my father, whom in some ways she resembles. There is a general temperamental reason for this, hard to put into words, but also a very specific reason which is very easy to explain. Both were fascinated by Chinese people and their civilisation and Valerie much respects any English-speaking person who can speak Chinese well, as my father certainly could. Also, my father, unlike me, rose from a working-class background, partly through simple hard work, to a reasonably high position in the Foreign Office. Valerie is a great respecter of hard work and self-improvement. Perhaps it helped that her father, whom I once talked to on the phone but never met, had a roughly similar background. He had risen from a lower middle-class childhood in Stoke-on-Trent to the rank of Air Commodore in the Royal Air Force.

I, however, am not my father, and it is a mystery to me why she continued to see me, but it is not a mystery on which I shall linger for long. I had many educational advantages that my father lacked. This fact was a double-edged sword: my father had achieved far more than me from a much less favourable base, but I had the advantage of attending a school – Lancing – which I am sure, perhaps wrongly sure – provided a better general education than Chesterfield Grammar School. My stammer was hardly an attraction; it had put quite a few women off before. And although far from broke, I was also far from rich, living in a modest flat far from Kensington or Chelsea where I know both of us, quite unrealistically, would have liked to live. Above all, she had a mathematics degree, and had, and has, very little interest in the poetry and imaginative literature that has always so fascinated me. She loves opera, but symphonic and chamber music much less. And, for her, Mozart sadly is definitely not the best operatic composer of all time.

Our relationship began at a time of stress. I was still sleeping 2 nights a week at what was now my mother's house in Wimbledon, and often also slept at Valerie's house at Orbain Road in Fulham. Inhabiting three houses in different parts of London does not always lead to domestic calm and necessitates a multitude of toothbrushes. Worse, my job came under threat – again – but after some anxiety I was offered a job at Victoria Library which involved mainly the enquiry desk work I preferred. This was in 1995; I stayed there till my retirement in 2005. I was lucky: those last 10 years of my working life were much the happiest. I had a job which on the whole I enjoyed and the company of someone I loved. For quite a lot of that time we had two dwellings to live in. Of course I wrote little poetry; for me poetry does not arrive out of happiness, a revealing confession. And, above all, we had reasonably good health. If I felt guilty that my mother's death had partly made all this possible, I remembered that she herself would quite certainly have wished me to be happy.

It is 2 a.m. in a very hot summer in the late 1990s. My bedroom window is open and balmy air creeps in from the field between my flat and the graveyard beyond. I lean out of the window – but not too far, for I'm scared of heights – and look at the pathetically few stars visible in London. My parents are dead – gone – and I know I shall never see them again. Shakespeare's "the rest is silence" is only the half of it. In the morning I know these feelings will wither away with breakfast, the train to Victoria and hot chocolate at the Costa Coffee shop on the concourse. But they will return.

Living partly at Valerie's house at Orbain Road in Fulham was an adventure for me. Fulham seemed an immensely prosperous place compared to East Dulwich, though I doubt this is quite as true now as in 1995. Valerie, unlike me, rises late in the morning. On a Sunday I would often stroll down to the Fulham Road and eat breakfast at a café while imbibing the Sunday papers, a time-wasting activity at which I have always felt guilty. At such times it was a relief not to have to worry about my dead mother even though I was simultaneously grieving for her. Walking down to the café I used to obsessively count the number of houses for sale as I passed. If it was more than 10, I felt obscurely pleased. Why? I have no idea. A large number did not necessarily mean that Valerie's house was rising in value. It might mean the reverse.

Valerie's house was also very near the Thames. It was wonderful to stroll down there in the early morning and watch oarsmen row past as I lingered on the Thames path. A scenic pub, the Crabtree, referred to above, was a good place for a drink. Her house was quite near my brother's house across the Thames in Barnes, and several times on Boxing Day I walked there across Putney Bridge to meet Richard and his family, and often walked back too.

This idyll of two houses was not to last. In 2000 Valerie sold her Orbain Road house and gradually bought two other houses in nearby Hammersmith, closer to the Thames, as investments. She was very far-sighted in doing this even though I failed to understand this at the time. She was worried that she had no regular pension from her previous work. We perforce retreated to my flat in East Dulwich, where we survived reasonably comfortably till 2012 when we bought our present house in Purley. It was stressful renewing the flat's lease, which in my usual unworldly way I had unwisely allowed to run down to 69 years. I also had a new roof put on at the suggestion of my next-door neighbour with whom the original roof was shared. I mention these matters without apology; many people have to deal with worse household problems but they occupied what seemed to me to be a grossly disproportionate amount of my time. As I've grown older I've found that such matters upset me more and more; I lie awake worrying about them when much more serious problems – my career, for example - disturbed me far less in my youth. I fear heredity is at least partly to blame for this. My mother was exactly the same and complained in her old age that she worried about many possible occurrences which never actually occurred. My father had a different attitude: he told me once he felt not at all guilty about leaving plenty of house repairs to his heirs.

One plus at that time was the chance to travel. Valerie was keener on foreign travel than I was, but I was content to tag along and often enjoyed myself far more than I expected, though always – a relic from childhood – I counted the hours till my return even on the happiest holiday. My part-time hours of course helped, even though sometimes because of staff shortages I was working 27 or even 30 hours per week rather than the 24 hours originally agreed. Few things are more boring than reading about holidays unless you have a talent for making them interesting, which I lack. But there were two destinations which were especially fascinating because they completed a circle which my life had left so far incomplete. However, almost before we began our custom of taking at least two holidays a year, Valerie decided to exchange teaching mathematics for teaching English abroad, and to do this she decided to live in Brussels for a year.

Luckily the channel tunnel had just been built, and I found myself weekendening there and occasionally spending whole weeks there when I could take them off from work. Valerie rented flats in several different parts of the city so I got to know Brussels quite well. Brussels is a shy city, without the extravert attractions of London or Paris. But its virtues are considerable. The Musee des Beaux Arts is one of the best art galleries in the world, and I learnt it contains pictures other than Brueghel's *The Death of Icarus*. There are wonderful art nouveau buildings to visit. We visited Bruges and Ghent, not to speak of Antwerp and the Rubens house. We made one trip southeast of Brussels where we stayed in a hotel and walked to a mill converted into a brewery where we tasted niche beers. Once we visited a small village south of Brussels where, amazingly, they were playing Bach's arrangement of a concerto from Vivaldi's *L'Estro Armonico* for four harpsichords *actually on four harpsichords*. Returning on a Monday morning to work often turned into a desperate but enjoyable dash. Helped by the time difference, I could arrive at Waterloo, then the Eurostar terminal in London, by 8.45 a.m., and by means of a cab arrive at Victoria Library only 15 minutes late, usually I hope unnoticed while pre-work cups of coffee were still being drunk.

Belgium is an interesting country and possibly provides a foretaste of the future in many countries. There is a language divide between Flemish and French, and the country copes with it, but only with difficulty. English was useful to us because both language groups would rather use it than what many see as a rival language. It is a sad but useful fact that language and

national differences are less important in Europe since the Second World War mainly because population changes, often violently enforced in 1945, eliminated many of them. The most important change was that many German speakers were forced to flee many countries in eastern and central Europe where usually they formed an important minority. Many countries divided up later to better represent their different language groups; Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia are good examples. Belgium would find it very hard to do this: hence the problem. Where this problem exists elsewhere and sometimes violence erupts, as in Spain's Basque country, language difference is usually the reason. Countries with increasing language or ethnic divides may be building up problems for themselves. Or – this is the future – they may not. Norway's peaceful excision from Sweden in 1905 set an example which sadly has not been often enough followed since.

It's March 26th 2000. I'm keen to attend a morning concert at a central Brussels hotel, perhaps the Hotel Bernard, where Beethoven's piano and wind quintet, Opus 16, is being played. It's less good than its model, Mozart's similar quintet, but definitely worth hearing. I go in and sit down on an empty chair. A man arrives and, very politely, asks why I am occupying it. I must have looked very surprised. He says, in glacially polite French, "usually, in most countries, it's considered rude to occupy someone's seat during a concert's interval." I am bemused, apologise, I hope profusely, and leave the hotel very quickly. I've forgotten it's the spring solstice and the clocks have gone an hour forward. I've missed the Beethoven and fear I've let England down.

Our first trip outside Europe was to Singapore. I had passed through the city twice when a small boy en route to and from Peking and had always wanted to see how things had changed since. Valerie had taught mathematics in a school there as a young woman and had many friends there. So in 2001 we flew there and also visited Malacca and Kota Kinabalu in Malaysia. This trip gave me a considerable but pleasant shock. Not surprisingly, Singapore had completely changed. The heat was overwhelming, far worse than I recalled, probably because I had put on far too much weight in the past 50 years. We stayed in a luxury hotel, the *Elizabeth*, which could have existed nowhere in the world and certainly not in Singapore, in 1953. The flight out was a single journey with no intermediate stops. And Valerie's friends! Those of our age or a little older were much as I had expected. But their children were – to me – unbelievably sophisticated, even more so than supposedly comparable children I knew in England. It was as though Singapore had jumped two or three generations at once. Their command of English was excellent, and in addition they could speak fluently two or sometimes three other languages: Mandarin Chinese, a compulsory subject at school, Singlish and sometimes a Chinese dialect such as Cantonese or Hokkien. The shopping malls they frequented were as advanced as those I saw later in the United States and better than anything in London. Orchard Road rivalled any street in Los Angeles or New York. Although there was much personal freedom, Singapore was not really a democratic country; free speech was hobbled and parliamentary seats gerrymandered where necessary. But financial corruption seemed small and, considering its unfavourable starting point, the government was better at providing bread and circuses than almost anywhere else in the world. Those negotiations in 1969 in which I had played no more than a negligible part, where the British insisted on trying to explain to the Singaporeans how they should spend their aid, seemed ridiculously silly in retrospect. Are Chinese people actually more intelligent than Europeans? And what exactly does "intelligence" mean in this context? And what about other races too? Strong contradictory arguments exist about both these questions, but not to discuss them, and not to study the issues concealed behind them, seems both silly and dangerous. The attitude of some – not all - Victorians to sexual matters and that of the Catholic Church in the

17th century to modern astronomy come to mind. The truth about such things may not be as scary as many people secretly seem to think.

In a curious way Singapore reminded me greatly of Venice. There are, to put it mildly, differences: It is hotter and it is Chinese. But the sea nearby was and is the main reason for both cities' existence. Singapore's entrepreneurial spirit must surely resemble very greatly that in Venice in, say, 1400. The Venetian doges seem to me much like the families who ruled and still just about rule Singapore under the umbrella of the People's Action Party. Lee Kuan Yew would have been an ultra-efficient top doge. What appeared to be missing were two things: the canals and the art. The vast amount of land reclamation in Singapore is perhaps the equivalent of those canals. But where is the art? Or the literature? Perhaps I am too western in my culture to see it. Or perhaps I forget that it took some time after its foundation for great art to appear in Venice. Or is there a great writer hiding away there even now? And if so, which language will he or she write in?

I suspect many Chinese visiting Singapore – and many do now – secretly regard the city state as an almost perfect model of what they would wish their own country to become. The entrepreneurial spirit is strong in the Chinese; one of Mao Tse Tung's main errors was not to realise how important this is for many, perhaps a majority, of Chinese people. But it is modified and softened by what many Singaporeans regard as beneficent control from above. Two important questions: will Singapore make a peaceful transition to a more democratic regime less dominated by the People's Action Party, and will China's huge size compared to Singapore's mean one day it will rule there? We shall see, but probably not in my lifetime.

That last period on the Victoria Library enquiry desk, from my mother's death in 1995 till my retirement in 2005 contained one tiny event that gradually changed my life in an increasingly important way. One day a tall young man, obviously a Slav from eastern Europe, appeared at the desk. His advent was not so surprising: the Victoria coach station was right next door, and after communism's collapse in 1989 more and more young people from eastern Europe had been arriving by coach and coming to the desk for help. Few were as confused as the elderly American couple who wanted to know, having wandered around London for hours, where "downtown" was. Nor were they usually as out of luck as the young Germans – fortunately very fit – who had booked into the youth hostel at Polesden Lacey near Dorking thinking it was in central London. No, this obviously well organised young man's wish was different; he wanted a copy of Geraldus Cambrensis's works. I suggested he visit our Central Reference Library. I think he had just visited Wales and in particular Pembrokeshire so quite naturally – for him – this was the book he now needed to read.

I thought little of this. He had briefly told me that he taught history in a secondary school at Litovel, a small town in Moravia not far from Olomouc where he had been to university, so a desire to read Geraldus after wandering around Pembrokeshire was not so surprising. The following summer he appeared again, and soon, at his request, but very much at my wish, we were corresponding. Then came a request to spend a London holiday in my flat, very tentatively made, and with assurances that he would provide his own food and meet every personal expense for both him and his girl-friend. He could not have chosen a more inconvenient time; Valerie was planning a kitchen refurbishment then. But we agreed, and to cut a very long story short, there have followed five different holidays in the Czech Republic, where Martin Berka – such is his name – has hosted us so thoughtfully that from the moment of our arrival he always arranges every tiny aspect of our holiday, showing and explaining many things that an ordinary tourist would never have seen or understood. These days he has – what he lacked then – a very

beautiful and competent wife, Petra, who teaches law at Olomouc University, and a beautiful daughter, Sasha.

We are quickly approaching Policka on the borders of Bohemia and Moravia; Martin is not a slow driver. I've always preferred fast drivers. Martin is not very like Cathy Ebenezer except at the wheel. Perhaps as a lifelong non-driver I don't see the possible dangers. I'm keen to see the birthplace of a favourite Czech composer, Bohuslav Martinu, who spent his childhood in a flat at the top of the village's church tower where his father earned his bread as the village's chief fire-watcher. Bohuslav was a sickly child and often had to be carried up the 193 steps to the top, an ascent which thankfully I have only made once, with Martin anxiously looking around every few steps to ensure I haven't had a heart attack. Martinu, a child prodigy, learnt the violin, not the piano, because even Martinu's father could not carry a piano up those steps. The apartment is now a museum but sadly is shut. However, Martin's girlfriend Petra – now his wife – swings into action. Her status as a teacher at Olomouc University gains us entrance; the lady staffing the local tourist office is an ex-pupil. Soon we are at the top. The view reminds me of Smetana's tone poem on Bohemia's woods and fields; we saw Smetana's birthplace on the same holiday. Later Martin uncomplainingly drives us eastwards to Litovel.

Anyone who wants to explore Martinu's music could do worse than listen to the concerto for double string orchestra, probably written in response to the Munich crisis in 1938, and the *Frescoes of Piero della Francesca*, written after a visit in Italy. I have long wished to hear this work performed with Respighi's *Botticelli Triptych* in the same concert, preferably a promenade concert, and really should write to the B.B.C. to suggest this. Suggesting works to be performed can sometimes work. For some years I attended the Kings Lynn festival; my friends Bob and Jay Trett often asked me to stay for it when Bob was director of the Kings Lynn museum. I've been fond for many years of the concerti grossi by Pieter Hellendaal, a Dutchman who worked first in Kings Lynn and then in Cambridge, in the second half of the 18th century. His concertos in D minor and E flat are real masterpieces, and I had hoped that Peterhouse would do something in 2021 to celebrate the tercentenary of his birth. For obvious reasons this didn't happen.

I shall never forget our first meeting with Martin in mainland Europe. We had spent a few days in Vienna, and when he arrived we were bundled us into his car – a Skoda, of course, - and taken very quickly across the Czech border to the site of the battle of Austerlitz. From a vantage point nearby he explained very clearly how it was fought and exactly why Napoleon won. Then we were driven up the hill to the chateau of Slavkov, the Austrian chancellor Kaunitz's residence in Moravia when he wasn't advising the empress Maria Theresa in Vienna and elsewhere. Valerie exclaimed with delight when we were shown in to the main reception room in the castle.

Kaunitz in one sense exemplified the position of the Czechs in the Hapsburg Empire after they lost their freedom in the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620. His family was originally Czech, but he was content to serve the Hapsburgs and perhaps spoke better German than Czech. He advised both Maria Theresa and her son the Emperor Joseph II and on the whole his advice was much valued. Was he wrong to do so? Slowly, under Joseph's rule and much more in the 19th century, the position of the Czechs improved. Gradually they were allowed to speak Czech in their schools, and to follow the Protestant faith if they wished. It is hard to see how anything else Kaunitz and those like him could have done would have had better results.

Martin and his wife Petra were kind to us in many other ways. On a different visit he drove us to Kromeriz where Titian's horrifying painting from his old age, *The Flaying of Marsyas*, is on display.

In the baroque gardens we met by chance a Lithuanian girl with whom he spoke in Russian, a language they had both learnt only grudgingly at school. Martin was born in 1973. He was 16 when the communists lost power. It must have been very strange at school when history teaching was transformed. No doubt his background – his parents were opposed to the communists - helped him to adapt to the changes. I remember on our visit an insignificant old man bicycling along being pointed out to us. He had formerly been an important communist. Now he was left alone, unharmed but powerless. I have tried to persuade Martin to write a memoir of his childhood. It would be fascinating.

On one visit we met an aunt of Martin's who told us an extraordinary story. Her father was in the resistance during the war and was caught, I think for trying to blow up a railway line. Early in 1945 he was taken to a prison in Dresden and told he would be shot, but not on which day. Sometime later he heard a tremendous rumbling and in the end in some way or other the prison doors became unlocked and he fled into the streets around the gaol. It was February 13th 1945, the day when the famous bombing of Dresden began. He found a clothes shop which had been abandoned, put on civilian clothes and after many adventures walked back to the Czech lands. Any trained historian would be rightly suspicious of such a story, but it is just possible it is true. If it is, it makes one think again about the morality of the bombing of Dresden.

Martin's family was definitely of the party, an increasingly large party, who hated the communists. One of Martin's aunts had moved to Paris before the war, and any letters from her, however innocent, aroused suspicion. When Martin's father had to do his national service, he was sent down a uranium mine near Prague where there was no, or very minimal, protection against radiation. Some of his fellow miners, but not thankfully Martin's father, could not have children as a result. I think of this when I hear people in England compare Stalin's rule favourably with Hitler's. These compulsory imprisonments continued long after Stalin's death in 1953.

There were also three holidays to the United States where we relied mainly on staying with friends. One of the advantages of acquiring a partner, especially in middle age, is that you automatically acquire your partner's friends too. We were lucky; we – both of us - genuinely didn't dislike any of these new friends. On our first trip to New York we stayed with JoAnn Ianniello, whom I had met at a party in Stella Jones's flat before she married Richard Leigh. JoAnn was a schoolteacher in Astoria in Queens where she lived, conveniently close by subway to Manhattan and most of the great museums and art galleries. Her house is also conveniently near to the Brooklyn Museum, where we saw by chance a wonderful exhibition of Caillebotte's work on one of our trips. JoAnn has always loved British life and culture, and it is a mystery to me that it is very often Americans without any Anglo-Saxon background who seem to like Britain and the British best. Read Edmund Wilson's wonderful critical essays and you will see what I mean. Astoria has some of the best restaurants in New York which are much cheaper than those in the centre. We then took a train to Baltimore, where two Chinese friends of Valerie's, ex-tenants in her Fulham house, lived. One of them, a very bright young man, was studying medicine at Johns Hopkins University. When we arrived, we walked from the station to the small hotel where we were booked, and were reprimanded for traversing a very dangerous part of the city. In bed we could hear almost constant police sirens which kept us awake. But for me compensation was a visit to the Walters Art Museum, as it was called then, with at least one superb painting by Manet, and a drive around Washington where I discovered that the house I had lived in in the late 1940s had been pulled down and replaced by a supermarket. When we stayed with JoAnn a few years later, we took a train to Newhaven in Connecticut to see the

Mellon collection of British art at Yale University. This time we were wiser and took a taxi from the station to the university. I had mixed feelings about this wonderful collection. In one sense it is sad that so many examples of English art have left England. On the other hand it is good that foreigners, particularly Americans, can get to know our art. British art, like American art, is often underrated because too little of it has seeped abroad.

Another trip was more ambitious. We flew to San Francisco, where we stayed with nobody, and then visited in turn Phoenix in Arizona and La Jolla, just north of San Diego, in both cases staying with friends. Few friends could have been more different. Valerie's friend in Phoenix was director of the ballet company there. He had met Valerie first when she had been teaching in Singapore and had helped at the ballet school there. Ki Juan had risen from a very humble childhood to become a distinguished ballet dancer, and after his retirement a teacher. We saw one or two classes at the Phoenix ballet school, but my main memory of Phoenix is walking his dog not long after sunrise when it was still cool. Luckily the dog knew exactly where to go; otherwise I would quickly have got completely lost. All the birdsong accompanying our walk was fascinating and strange. Much as I enjoyed Phoenix, its mode of life there seemed very artificial to me; without air conditioning few people would I think wish to live there. We spent one night at Valle many miles to the north en route to visit the Grand Canyon. I'm glad I have seen this, but it is strange how one's most distinctive memories of holidays are of unexpected unique events. On this holiday I remember best helping to trundle an old lady's luggage around what seemed like many miles through San Francisco's airport so she could catch her plane. Her conversation was fascinating, but I can remember not one word of it.

This was not my only conversation with old ladies. We also stayed alone in a hotel in Los Angeles, and while Valerie visited a film studio I tried recklessly to visit three art galleries in one day. The first was the Huntington Library and Art Museum in San Marino. A bus, almost entirely inhabited by poor Spanish speaking people, led me to within a mile of the site, and I walked the remainder of the distance surrounded by large houses surrounded in their turn by large watered perfumed gardens. When I reached the museum I was an hour early, and sheltered in a fashionable café a few steps away where my English accent was soon recognised by two ladies at a nearby table. At their insistence we joined forces and they drove me a very few yards to the art gallery, where their status as friends of the gallery guaranteed them immediate entrance. They were both widows who did not much seem to mourn their recently dead husbands, were fascinating conversationalists, obviously very rich and – I lost their phone numbers. It is well that I do not know what such carelessness may have cost me.

The art gallery was well worth seeing, although you have to like pictures such as Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* and Thomas Lawrence's *Pinkie*, more fashionable in Victorian England than now, really to enjoy the collection. The gardens would have fascinated my mother and my Aunt Kate but in England would have seemed a tad garish. In Los Angeles they fitted in perfectly. I have heard, possibly unfairly, that the founder Henry Huntington was a most unpleasant man. It is strange how many unpleasant men, or perhaps their pleasanter wives, have founded wonderful art galleries. Hints of this permeate the histories of the Frick collection in New York and the Lady Lever art gallery in Port Sunlight. The latter gallery has the first restaurant in a gallery incorporated in it when built. Surely only a woman, presumably Lady Lever, could have first thought of this.

Our last trip to the United States meant visiting Ki Juan again; he had moved to Washington where he was heading the much more important ballet school there. Here I finally fulfilled my ambition to see my favourite painting, Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. There's an irony

here: I don't often like Renoir's work, but here I think he has struck gold. Everything is right; the lush foliage around the boat, the picnic food which looks so delicious, but above all the figures and the interplay – or rather interplays – of emotion between them all. Aldous Huxley once wrote an interesting essay on a painting by Piero della Francesca called *The Best Picture*. Huxley has an advantage over me: his painting was not well known then, and few people had visited the relatively obscure Italian provincial town where it hangs. But if I ever wrote an essay on this picture, I would use Huxley's essay as a model. And it doesn't matter that you can taste none of that food.

Valerie has hired a car for us to spend a day or two in the Appalachians. I know I shall never find that farm where in 1949 I woke up to hear cocks crowing along the valley with my parents happily asleep in the next room. Instead we reach the Shenandoah river and drive off the road to sit peacefully by its banks and I remember and even hum, not very originally, part of Paul Robeson's famous song. Nearby we glance at a young man who on closer inspection appears to be polishing a revolver. We leave quickly and quietly and soon find ourselves at a hotel where the lift is out of order. We get a very reduced price for carrying our own bags to the first floor.

The human memory – or is it just my memory? – is very strange. Ki very kindly drove us to Williamsburg, the first time I'd seen a satnav in action. I can remember almost nothing of the town which although worth seeing is to quite a large extent a 20th century fake, though an intelligent one. But I can remember one incident, when we were shown round a building where a correctly dressed guide pretended to be Patrick Henry, the Virginian rebel who favoured independence but who ironically disliked the constitution that was later adopted. The guide made an excellent speech imitating Henry, and I would have loved to reply, imitating in my turn the elder Pitt and his moderate attitude to the revolutionary sentiment in America. My stammer stopped me and I felt very frustrated. Is it my vanity that makes me remember this?

My vanity certainly makes me remember a question that Ki asked me during the journey. He asked me what the word "partita" means in classical music. I thought it meant a suite, but what kind of suite? Ki was polite, but I know disappointed I didn't have an exact answer. Later I found out, but forgot to tell Ki the next time we met in London. No doubt he had quite forgotten the whole conversation. It is, sadly, so very like me that I hadn't.

One trip to the United States, made in 2003, involved no friends. We simply flew to Boston and stayed there for just over a week. I was able fully to satisfy my passion for visiting art galleries. Boston's main art gallery is of course famous, but the city also contains the much smaller Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum built as a quite remarkable copy of a Venetian palazzo. We also took a train to Worcester, about 50 miles inland, where there is a further wonderful art gallery. An ambition of mine, almost certainly unfulfillable, is to spend a month or two with Valerie visiting most of the famous provincial art galleries in the United States. The tour would take in Hartford, Chicago, St. Louis, Milwaukee and many other places. Everywhere I would have dinner in the city's best Chinese restaurant. Could I survive, or afford, so many plane and train journeys? Probably I shall never find out.

One special trip was to celebrate my retirement, on my 60th birthday in August 2005. We flew to Hong Kong which I had not visited since 1953, and then on for a few days in Shanghai. It was very hot in Hong Kong, and I am amazed in retrospect that I was surprised by this. But I suppose in 1953 I had been both much slimmer and smaller and more attuned to the heat from living through two Peking summers. This time I visited the New Territories for the first time and began to see how Chinese people really lived. The density of population was such that English people

would I think find it culturally impossible to exist in a similar environment. I liked the outlying islands best. If Europe had never existed it is just possible to imagine a society like Venice or Cadiz arising in Hong Kong after many years of uninterrupted economic growth. Trade to south east Asia beyond would surely have sustained it. The art, however, would surely have been different, and quite unimaginable by us. And would Hong Kong's influence on southeast Asia and Australia have been anything like Cadiz's influence on what we now call Latin America?

Shanghai was scary. I am glad I saw it, but never wish to visit again. There was a huge amount of building work in progress, and only slowly did I understand that the apparent complete chaos in the streets was in fact a carefully ordered chaos, overseen partly by an efficient autocratic government and partly by the social instincts of the Chinese people itself. Without doubt Shanghai is becoming, slowly but surely, the economic and financial capital of the world, and one day will undoubtedly outstrip both London and New York. Will this be a good thing? I am less optimistic now than I was then in 2005. But China's history is full of surprises, and in particular full of the unexpected fall of seemingly fireproof dynasties. What China has never experienced is democratic rule or anything approaching it. We shall see.

We did see the one very interesting art museum in Shanghai. (I believe now there are several). Amazingly we found a taxi driver who knew where it was. What we never found was the central tourist office. We never found it because it didn't exist. What was revealing was that many people who must have known this refused to say so, and we were led a long wild goose chase around Shanghai trying to find it. In a strange way this reminded me of the English breakfasts in our otherwise excellent hotel. They looked exactly like English breakfasts, but tasted quite different. Proper Chinese breakfasts, obtainable in a cheap cafe down the road, were of course much better.

My parents had been married in Shanghai in 1938, my mother the day after arriving from England after 2 years' absence from my father enforced by the British government. The consulate building where this happened had been pulled down not long before our arrival. Their house in a pastoral western suburb had long since ceased to exist, though we did – possibly – find its gateposts, or those of a similar house, in what we thought was the same road. Huge skyscrapers and shopping malls rose all around. We retreated to a café. The young lady, no more than 18 or 19, who served us, looked at us in uncomprehending confusion when we mentioned my parents had been living nearby before the Japanese war. We must have seen antediluvian to her.

That retirement was a risk. I had no pension apart from a reasonably generous work pension until my state pension kicked in in 2010. Plus those foreign trips cost money, though it is always cheaper to travel with a companion sharing the hotel costs. But I did have about £150,000 of capital (mostly but not all inherited from my parents) very little of which I actually used. Also, the mortgage on my flat, quite fortuitously and unplanned by me, expired in 2004, a few months before I retired. My roof too had recently been replaced and the flat's lease, now down to 69 years, extended to 125 years, expenses which luckily were now behind me. But I am much more cautious today, perhaps dangerously cautious, and would not now take such a risk. I'm much more aware of the costs of end-of-life care.

What most scared me about retirement was that I had to hold a retirement party for my colleagues. In fact it was not a disaster. Many people attended, in a pub on the Buckingham Palace Road. My boss, Jane Little, gave a speech in which she said that if I ever began to watch daytime television I had better take care. I gave a short speech in which I did not stammer

overmuch. And I received two wonderful presents, which had obviously meant a lot of work for someone.

One was a framed collage of photos of Victoria Library at work, some of which were of my colleagues; it was a relief that not all were of me. You sometimes see similar collages in people's houses, but they're almost always of families, not of work places or colleagues. The other was a book containing a rhymed account of my life and work at the library, a brilliant exercise in kindly satire. Appropriate pictures were attached. I have a confession: I sometimes leaf through this book when I feel I need a boost to my morale, rather as sometimes I flip through my better Lancing College school reports. Although I did write a thank you note to my ex-colleagues at the library, I should have found out more about who had made these presents, and thanked them individually. It saddens me that I now have no friends left from my library days.

I cannot resist adding an extremely vain coda. When I saw a recording of Cary Grant making a wisely brief speech after receiving an honorary Oscar in which he said that no greater honour could come to him than the esteem of his colleagues, I thought of myself and these two presents. Can there be vainer thoughts than these?

At about this time, quite by chance, I ran into Roy Tranckle in the café at the National Portrait Gallery. He had attended the stammering self- help group at the Finsbury Health Centre in the early 1980s and once had very kindly come to see me at work when I had missed several sessions. I doubted whether they were worthwhile and he very rightly persuaded me I was wrong. We had tea – the café was then and is still one of the dearest in London – and he seemed so much more interesting a person than he had done before. A year or so later he also introduced me, or reintroduced me, to Owen Simon. He too had attended the group too but I hardly remembered him. We rapidly discovered that we had both been at Cambridge and both read history, though his degree – a first – was better than mine and he was a few years younger. Rarely have I met such an interesting person: intelligent and full of a sensitive tact which he exercised both intellectually and personally. And of course Owen had a stammer, superficially quite like mine.

His career compares interestingly with mine. Although he had hated studying at Cambridge much as I had done, and for some of the same reasons, he did later in his life obtain a postgraduate diploma at the London School of Economics. He got in by the simple expedient of writing directly to Ralf Dahrendorf, the director, and asking for a place. I was different. After one failure, caused almost certainly partly by my stammer, I stuck to one job for the rest of my working life and accepted its limitations. Owen was more ambitious. He was helped by the fact that a Cambridge University first will get you an interview for most jobs, even if the interviewers' motive is simply curiosity. He began by teaching at a prominent public school. This lasted only two years, almost certainly because of his stammer. This was a pity as in a different world he would have made a really excellent teacher. Later jobs included economic adviser at the Institute of Mechanical Engineering, ditto at the Treasury, and a helper of Sir Andrew Green at Migration Watch. I think these moves – much more common today than then – caused him a lot of stress, much more than I could have borne, but did give him a greater and more varied experience of life than I had. Before his most untimely death in 2018, he, Roy and I used to meet every few weeks for a meal, sometimes combining this with a visit to somewhere interesting like Lewes or Stamford. There are few pleasanter things than lunch with retired friends, where you can talk as long as you like without fear of a dull afternoon at work curtailing proceedings. None of us drank much at these meetings; we didn't have to.

Conversations can vary as much by their type as much as by their quality. Some talk is full of *bon mots*. Boswell's life of Johnson and accounts - possibly - of Charles Lamb's talk come to mind, though people tend to remember the *bon mots* better than more ordinary talk. But read Hazlitt's account of Coleridge's talk and you will find there is very little actual quotation. Of course Hazlitt did not write things down assiduously as Boswell did. But I am sure it was the general quality of Coleridge's mind that attracted Hazlitt, not any particular sentence or phrase. So it was with Owen, although he would be embarrassed and even appalled by what I have just written could he read it.

It's the summer of 2017, less than a year before Owen's death. We are sitting outside in a restaurant on the marina at Brighton. It's a bright cloudless day. My mind is divided into two halves: one looking at the sky and the sea, so fascinatingly near and strange, and the other, peering into Owen's mind. What will he say next? And it is not just the anticipation which is so exciting. Owen's dislike of Britain's membership of the European Union - he did not dislike the Union itself - manifests itself in unexpected ways. For once I can concentrate on what is being said before the food comes. Often I can't. And whatever he says will be interesting. He can even make railways interesting. His best talk has vanished into the air. And the fault for this is mine.

People like Owen can transform how you look at things. The room I am typing in is famously untidy, strewn with the books and papers that Valerie cannot help leave lying around, and although I've become used to this over the years, the mess always mildly irritated me. When Owen saw it he looked straight at the mess and said: "How nice to be in a properly lived in room." Ever since I've looked at it through his eyes.

Yet another friend emerged after a long gap from that self-help stammerers' group at the Finsbury Health Centre: Richard Oerton. I think we got together after I wrote to him on a whim, though what sort of whim I can't remember. He had, and has, quite a bad stammer, despite working for many years as a solicitor. For part of that time he worked in the Law Commission, and his book about his time there is a classic description of a professional working life, worthy to stand beside Maurice Collis's *Trials in Burma*. He retired to a beautifully converted barn near Cannington on the Somerset levels, a home I've often wished I had visited more frequently. His wife, sadly now dead, was a brilliant cook and hostess. I can hear her west country burr - she was born near Barnstaple like my mother - as I type this. Suddenly I leave off writing and play Elgar's *Dream Children* on YouTube. As I listen to this despairingly melancholy work, I seem to see her playing as a little girl somewhere in a village near Barnstaple, near where my mother and Uncle James had played some years before.

Richard is best known for his books on free will, or rather for his belief that such a thing does not exist. Here I suspect I will part company with nearly all the minute number of people who will read this, for like him I cannot believe in such a thing. I cannot see where free will comes from, and if it does spring from some source free from the laws of causation, how on earth can any person be responsible for it? Here is not the place to discuss this, but I will write one thing: those who think this openly do not last long in professional society or the media if they make their views known. They resemble atheists in the 18th century like David Hume, who might write frankly about their views to close friends or discuss them in private but would not make such views known in public. Despite this, belief in the absence of free will is gradually seeping in to our society in many forms. In my youth sentences in the assizes were usually passed immediately by a judge after conviction by a jury. Nowadays, judges customarily ask for reports on the criminal and defer judgement. What reason can there be for this except that our

lawmakers believe that one's background can influence one's behaviour; in other words that the criminal did not fully possess free will? But then how can a person *partly* possess free will?

Fear of the consequences of such a belief if held generally is one reason for being scared of this theory. Another reason for disbelief is pride: a wish to believe that in some curious way we are in control of what we do. In fact I do not believe that society would change greatly if attitudes changed. In law the prevention of future crime would become the sole purpose of sentencing. Forgiveness of other people's faults might become a little commoner. In most other matters we would behave as we do now. Our attitude to the absence of free will would be like that of many young people to death: they act as if it were either an impossibility, or much further off in time than it actually is. One day I will believe in predestination, but not yet.

Lectures on philosophy, particularly the amateurish ones above which are all I am capable of, are out of place in an autobiography. But I think my belief has influenced my life profoundly if very quietly. Often I accept resignedly what people do because I can see they could never have acted in any other way. I *think* this may be the point of Evelyn Waugh's novel *A Handful of Dust*. In that novel Brenda Last cannot help doing evil because that is her unchangeable nature. In Waugh's eyes only God can save her. Indeed I am sure he thought only God can save any of us from our sins. Doubtless he had read assiduously *St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*. It must have helped him greatly that he believed in God. Indeed, he is once supposed to have remarked that without God he would have turned into an inferior version of Dylan Thomas.

As I type this a vision of Bournemouth opens out before me. I am about to meet Jim Crossland before seeing a film, but he has not quite arrived. I'm relieved although I do very much want to see him. I sit near the beach staring at the sea. It is a warm sunny day and bathers are enjoying themselves. A little boy, fleetingly angry, runs up and down clutching a bucket and spade. He is happy underneath his anger; his family is near. An ice cream vendor strolls by. Everything seems perfect. Is God existing – not standing or sitting or lying down – outside time looking at everything, including this tiny segment of life? I hope so, but I'm not optimistic.

Meeting Valerie involved – in the end – seeing her mother Dorothy, an intrepid if very odd lady who on the surface did not seem much disturbed by her husband's death which occurred in 2003. First I often spent weekends at her house near Roedean School on the outskirts of Brighton, and then, when she bravely moved down to Budleigh Salterton in a flat overlooking the sea, a move entirely organised by herself, we often spent weekends and longer periods in the summer with her until old age compelled her to move in with us in 2013.

These visits made further walks possible, and in particular one from Budleigh Salterton to Exmouth along the Devon Coastal Path, with wonderful views across the Exe estuary on the way. Even better was a shorter walk, along the river Otter to Otterton for lunch in a mill that had been converted into a pub. The food here was quite different from traditional Devonian pub food. Much big city influence was detectable. There was even a controversy over wild boar. You could sometimes buy wild boar sandwiches there. Some liked the idea; others were deeply shocked by it. A noticeboard displayed the different views. Further upstream lay Ottery St. Mary, with a wonderful church where Coleridge was born, though much of his education took place at Christ's Hospital, then very much a London school. When in his poem *Frost at Midnight* Coleridge writes of bells as "the poor man's only music", it is I am sure of those Ottery bells that he is thinking.

It is Christmas time. Compared to London streets, everything is very dark. I walk down Coastguard Road to the war memorial, thoughtfully placed away from the centre of the town with a superb view of the sea. I phone Rosalind Hibbins, a London friend who I know will be in her Kentish Town flat, for a chat. She is a Christian - a Roman Catholic - and this festival is important to her. I sit down on a convenient bench nearby. The contrast between her snug flat in London's Kentish Town and the cold and seemingly vast expanses of water I can see spreading out in the darkness below is immense. I do not know that Rosalind will be dead within five years. Her happy voice, always ready to laugh at my worst jokes, vibrates down the line. Why is it that this memory, when I was not even with her, remains so powerful within me?

Rosalind had emerged as a friend of Catherine Ebenezer, referred to above, and Margaret Kirkby. Gradually we slipped into the habit of eating in a Chinese restaurant in Soho every few weeks. Rosalind was a touchy character – you had to be careful not to offend her – but there were many rich compensations. Translating the memory of her father was a bad idea. Her personality had – to me – some curious characteristics. She was a great football fan, and had a season ticket to matches at West Ham United, a team her father had supported. She even attended the World Cup in Japan in 2002. After she retired early from a post at the British Library she took up sculpture and created several pieces commissioned by friends. I only once saw examples of her work, in an exhibition in a church in Bethnal Green designed by Sir John Soane, and I quite liked what I saw. She became friendly with a Japanese lady she met on a sculpture course, and at least once flew to Japan to stay with her armed with all the paraphernalia she need to sculpt. I saw her off at Heathrow. She looked like an explorer off to search for Amelia Earhart in the 1930s. She told me the paperwork concerning her sculpture tools utterly bemused the Japanese authorities when she arrived in Japan.

Reading this last paragraph I see I have failed to capture the essence of her, which was her sparkling effervescent laughter, behind which lurked an incisive enquiring mind and a piercing sometimes embarrassing kindness. She gave a lot of money and, more important, a lot of her time to the poor in Cambodia which she visited after the fall of the Pol Pot regime. A Daily Mail journalist called Arifa Akbar, a neighbour in the house in Kentish Town where she lived, wrote a striking account of her which at the time of writing is easily available on-line. She bore the humiliations of her last illness with unsurprising courage. She had ovarian cancer. Treating this involved many sessions of chemotherapy at the Macmillan Cancer Centre next to University College Hospital in London. She usually wanted friends to sit with her during these, and I much looked forward to these. I hope I allowed her to talk enough. I learnt a lot about her past during these chats, but there was plenty of fun and laughter too, and sometimes people turned around surprised to see what was going on. I was present by chance when a consultant told her there was no hope, and her courage then startled me. At her funeral, during the interment, we sang at her request the West Ham United's anthem, "We're for ever blowing bubbles." How I dislike this silly song! But my dislike she would have understood and forgiven. During her decline there was one single awkward moment, when a conversation revealed that we had voted on opposite sides in the European Union referendum. She glared at me for a second, but then relaxed. It was as though a door into a room full of anger had been gently closed and the contents of that room magicked into an unsultry happiness. Her famous temper never erupted again in my presence.

One plus of visiting Valerie's mother was that Harry Guest, a poet and my old French master at Lancing, lived in Exeter close by; he had taught at Exeter School for some years before retiring. We met quite a few times for lunch at the mill in Otterton, and once walked along the river Otter from the mill there back to his car parked in Budleigh Salterton. He said favourable things about

my poetry which I think are sincere. On one walk we decided (a) that Byron's *Don Juan* is a much under-rated poem with a wonderful control of verse form and (b) that Walter de la Mare is a much under-rated poet for exactly the same reasons. How nice it is to praise poets rather than denigrate them! On such a walk you don't consciously look at the landscape; it looks at you and unconsciously seeps into what you say.

Harry was a brilliant translator as well as a various and under-rated poet. His masterpiece here is his book *The Distance, The Shadows*, a selection of English versions of Victor Hugo's poetry. I know no better translations of French poetry made in the last century. If you read his translation of Hugo's *Booz Endormi*, you will (a) enjoy a wonderful example of pastoral art, (b) understand at last the book of Ruth, and (c) enjoy Samuel Palmer's paintings, albeit indirectly, through a much fuller understanding of why he made them.

One of the best things about Budleigh Salterton was the early morning. I am an early riser; Valerie and her mother are not. I used to get up on a fine day, sidle along to the front, and buy a cheap breakfast which I could eat on a bench overlooking the beach. Sometimes I read the newspaper; sometimes a book. But mostly I looked out to sea. Often oil tankers, waiting their turn to unload, were sprinkled along the horizon. To my left the Jurassic Coast stretched out towards Sidmouth. To my right you could see beyond the Exe estuary to Torquay and beyond. Once or twice Valerie and I ventured by ferry across the water to Starcross and Torquay. I have never fulfilled my ambition to stay in a luxury Torquay hotel. If I do it will I am sure be a little less pleasant than I imagine. Often behind me as I sat I could see a plaque telling me that Millais painted *The Boyhood of Raleigh nearby*. I think there is no other similar plaque in Britain.

Once on our way to Budleigh Salterton Valerie and I called in at Lynton, where my cousin Philip had retired with his wife Pat and had, amongst other things, begun to play an important part in the Lyn and Exmoor Museum. I had mixed feelings about where they lived, as I think Valerie had. So far from civilisation in London! Londonitis is a disease that sadly I do quite wrongly sometimes suffer from. Phil and I had one of our usual very brief but far too rare chats about Wagner, a tiny niche in the wall of attrition dividing Wagnerians from those who are sceptical. In the background lurks Phil's father, Uncle James, who once taught me how to play a Mozart sonata with proper feeling, and our grandfather, who once wrote to a lady, probably his sister, about the proper way to sing Mozart's songs. To have them both here now, relaxed in armchairs almost within sight of Lynmouth beach, and telling Phil and me what *they* thought about Wagner, now that would be something!

Little exeats from Budleigh with Valerie were something special as such treats were gradually to become fewer as Valerie became weaker with her Parkinson's, which was first diagnosed at about this time. One was to A La Ronde, an eccentric house designed by Jane Parminter, whose even more eccentric background is worth reading about. Sidmouth became a favourite seaside resort we often visited. A ghost in this machine was the astronomer Norman Lockyer's observatory which he built just outside the town in 1912. We always meant to visit it but never got there. This was doubly sad, first because obviously I wanted to see it, but second, and more importantly, because if I had seen it I would have certainly written to Richard Filleul about it, and probably then rekindled a friendship which had been in danger of dying for many years.

Very attentive readers will remember Richard, such a great friend from the early 1970s when we lived near each other in Wimbledon. Since then he had married and remarried again, lived in Bristol (where I had visited him just once), Plymouth (ditto) and Edinburgh, taken the Scottish law exams and become a distinguished Scottish solicitor. We remained in touch, but only just.

Would I have remembered that astronomy was his first love? I hope so. Later he told me he had built in his adolescence a telescope as big as Lockyer's. When he died in 2018 a whole huge window fell out of my life. At least for few years before he died, we corresponded and there were two visits, many years apart, to his house in Dunfermline with its summerhouse and expansive view southwards across the Firth of Forth.

Richard's life, seemingly so ordinary on the outside, abounded with unusual incidents, not all of which I knew about before the final reflowering of our friendship. His first wife Rosemary went mad. After his second divorce he married his secretary's sister Maureen, a shy very beautiful Scots lady who finally gave him the happiness he had always been deprived of before. The wake after his funeral gave me a chance to meet some of his fellow Edinburgh lawyers and to appreciate the circle of friendship they formed. At the funeral I read, at his request, a poem by Philip Larkin. He much admired Larkin's successful attempt to marry writing poetry with a successful professional career. It was not by chance that he loved Wallace Stevens's poetry, and in particular *The Idea of Order at Key West*. He knew how futile his desire for order in the world and in his own life was.

Richard's death from prostate cancer was slow and painful, but it did not stop him writing funny emails when in hospital. Here he is on his attempts to watch television: - *I am improving and able to get about the ward on my Zimmer. Try out the day room, the nurses suggest; it's got a good telly. So I totter through to the day room and find the TV control. I recognise the on/off switch and press it. "No internet connection available", says the screen petulantly. The nurses lack postgrad degrees in advanced TV management and look helpless. Eventually a patient's daughter appears, gives us all the "what idiots" withering look and gets us on to BBC 1 in seconds. After 5 minutes of TV control intensive warfare I find a channel showing one of those homes in the sun programmes, always a good morale booster when it's snowing outside (it's Easter, what do you expect?) but eventually civic responsibility takes over and I try the news channel, having been spared any sight of Putin for over a week. "Service not available", says the screen. My goodness, I turn my back for a week and it's zombie apocalypse already! I try another channel, then switch back to the news channel, hoping for shots of gore in the newsroom. BBC Sport, announced the screen briefly (OMG, please, NO) before saying that there is no signal and the TV needs reinstalling from scratch. All further commands are ignored including the on/off switch. I slink off back to the bed, hoping nobody will notice. Shouldn't cost more than £1K or so surely.*

The year after Richard's death I took a train to Raynes Park station in London and walked back to Wimbledon up along the edge of the Common, a walk we had done so many times nearly 50 years before. I feel very sad. It is as if I had crept back all those years to find the streets empty and silent. Then I think of this email. Do I feel better? No. I start to cry but then I laugh too. I sit down and look at the view, so much loved by my parents and by Richard too. On that same common, not far away, a similar seat is inscribed with words from Lawrence Binyon's poem *The Burning of the Leaves*, "the same glory, to shine upon different eyes." But, of course, those eyes are not different, or not yet. Although Richard was capable of great kindness it is not his kindness that I remember best. He had a gift for saying exactly the right thing even though it was unexpected and could have been said by no-one else.

About then an old friend emerged surprisingly from the shadows: not of course from her shadows but from mine. I had never lost touch completely with my Cambridge friend Priscilla Grasby as Stella Leigh had been to school with her in Bolton and was a useful intermediary. I knew that she had married and had five children but recently had become separated from her

husband. I felt I needed her as a friend and wrote to her. Amazingly her daughter wanted to become a conservative M.P. and became successively our Foreign Secretary and, very briefly, Prime Minister. Almost more amazingly to me, the mother replied.

Our friendship resurrected itself in fits and starts, partly made necessary by her living in Leeds and me in London. Priscilla had changed, and like most people I've known as they grew up, for the better. Not surprisingly she had become much more independent and self-reliant, surer too of herself in everything she did. She could drive, she watched over her children with impressive calm, and seemed unworried by her divorce. We did not exactly meet in cathedral cities unknown to the clergy, but did consort in places such as Hull, Selby and Kings Lynn to look at churches and generally ruminate about the world. She made me feel I had lived too much of my life in London, and that holidaying in Lincolnshire might be more interesting than holidaying in Venice. On one occasion she drove me around the East Riding looking at churches less famous but just as fascinating as Beverley Minster. She also once nobly sacrificed an afternoon walking with me – probably no great sacrifice – so I could do some unanticipated extra research on my father in Chesterfield Public Library, which surprisingly turned out to be very valuable.

She was not afraid to be unfashionable. When we attended a David Hockney exhibition at the Royal Academy, she was rightly not impressed by his work – sixth form diversions at best – but was pleased to be reminded of various parts of the East Riding where she had walked. She is the only friend I know who really enjoyed urban walking with me. Once we walked from Erith to Woolwich along the Thames Path and on another occasion from South Bermondsey station to Tower Bridge. Both times when we stopped for lunch I think she would have gladly walked further. I was too slothful to accompany her. Passing a sewage treatment station evinced interest, not disgust. Introducing her to Owen Simon, described elsewhere, would have been interesting. She would not have dismissed his interest in railways as a quirk. And always, on those walks, I never forgot Valerie in the background, the rock on which all my friendships were by now based. It was not by chance that she got on well with Priscilla.

For many years after I retired I worked at the headquarters of the British Stammering Association as a volunteer just a few steps away from Bethnal Green tube station in Old Ford Road. St John's church in Bethnal Green where I had seen Rosalind Hibbins's sculptures is just down the road. I'd done some very unskilled work for the association in the 1990s, mainly stuffing envelopes, an activity unneeded now which perversely I much enjoy. Then I gave up helping when my parents needed more care and attention. After I retired from paid work in 2005, I returned as their librarian till I retired again from voluntary work in 2019. My stints there helped me more than the charity; I became very fond of the staff there, and especially of the director, Norbert Lieckfeldt, a German who mysteriously seemed to prefer living in England. He ran things efficiently without any hint of unnecessary showmanship or egotism. He was very tolerant of my many deficiencies, particularly in the computer department. When he left I felt it was time to go; the staff had rightly become so young that I felt like the dinosaur I almost was. And, much more important, I think my replacement had much better computer skills.

It is the autumn of 2009. The British Stammering Association staff, both regular employees and volunteers, have been asked to 10, Downing Street for reasons that never become clear to me; as a librarian working just one afternoon a week many aspects of the association's work pass me by. I show a letter at the entrance gate to the street.; the times when you could walk right pass the Prime Minister's door have long gone. Our mobile phones have to be handed in. Gordon Brown never turns up at the reception. When a brave soul dares to ask his wife why not, she simply replies he has too much work to do. The canapes and wine are excellent. But I'm

bored. Carefully watched by a guard, I wander off to what must surely be the cabinet room. I try to imagine what it must have been like here in 1914 or 1938. Am I so much more stupid than they were? I decide not. Is this vanity or realism? I would certainly have been hopeless in persuading the British people that fighting the Germans was as necessary in 1939 as in 1914. Perhaps in fact no one ever did persuade them, which was why the morale and performance of the British army – not the navy or air force, much more professional organisations – seems to have been considerably worse in the Second World War than in the First. I do not share these sombre thoughts with anybody. I spend a lot of the time wondering if I've left on the gas fire in my flat. I had. And Gordon Brown's wife is much more attractive in real life than on television.

I cannot leave Norbert without a tiny anecdote. Once at the British Stammering Association someone mentioned something exceedingly stupid that some public figure had done. Probably in a desire to show off, I quoted Schiller's remark that "about stupidity, even the Gods contend in vain." Behind me, I heard Norbert repeat the quote in German, very quietly and with no emphasis whatever. He very rarely spoke German at work.

In 2012 Valerie's mother's health deteriorated, and after she had a severe fall Valerie decided to move her to a house in London which we could convert so all of us could live together there. We had been anticipating this for a long time. For a long time too I had suspected that Purley might be a good site for such a house, because for some reason houses were proportionately cheaper there than elsewhere in south London. But I hated the idea of moving there. Purley, though a rich suburb, was and is an amorphous place, with no proper shopping centre and little historical interest, despite Horne Tooke's *Diversions of Purley*, one of the very few books of worth about what is now a London suburb, even though the locality he described has long since ceased to exist. Above all, I'd lived there before. Would I not feel defeated, retreating back to a place I'd lived in when I was 8 years old? Time would tell.

Time did tell, and I am reasonably happy here, although the temptations of other places still exist. My one achievement here is to do what I am doing now, i.e. to write. First I wrote a brief biography of my father. In doing so I learnt just a little about what real historical research entails: many hours of slogging through records at places such as the National Archives and only sometimes finding the documents you need. And then occasionally there is a satisfying discovery, as when in Chesterfield Public Library, I found back copies of the *Cestrefeldian*, the magazine of Chesterfield Grammar School, in which many of my father's exploits and even a talk he gave about his first visit to France at the age of 15 were recorded. I might add that without the helpfulness of a very junior librarian in Chesterfield I would never have tracked these down. Sadly I never thanked her properly.

These researches also gave me a little of what I have lacked all my life: self-confidence. I now know that when I doubted on leaving Peterhouse in 1966 that I had the skill to do proper historical research, I was wrong. I was not wrong in thinking that I'd have been bored beyond belief spending my life actually doing it. My vanity is such that the boredom only became tolerable when researching my own family.

Then I looked through my poetry books and sifted out 154 poems I wanted to preserve in print. I had then, and have now, grave doubts as to how good these few mostly very short poems are, but vanity again made me persist. Then I wrote a biography of my life up to the age of 18. I justified doing this on the undoubtedly spurious grounds that I was probably the last person alive to remember what the British Embassy compound in Peking in the early 1950s had really been like. Then I finally fulfilled a promise I'd made to myself many years ago and used the many

letters Ann Whitwell had written to me to write a little memoir of my friendship with her, which is why less space is given to her here than she deserves. Now I am writing this. None of these booklets has been properly published with all the paraphernalia of standard book numbers, and I am glad of this. All have been printed by a small company in south Croydon who must think I am mad, though at least they have profited a little from my madness. Although this house has considerable disadvantages, I doubt I'd have written any of these booklets in the Dulwich flat. In some way the knowledge that there is a garden outside, even though I cannot see it from where I type, is curiously sustaining.

Another thing that has sustained me is music. My love of Mozart has become something of an irrational passion. I rarely listen while I type, but when I am not typing the sound of music dredges up thoughts and ideas, perhaps very occasionally original ones, into my mind. Mozart's *Jupiter* symphony is helpful, and also a very different but curiously addictive work, Telemann's concerto for three violins and three oboes.

Travelling abroad has lessened, and when we – or I – do, it is often to visit friends. My friend David Hay-Edie retired to France, and I have made several visits to Annecy and then Grenoble to see him. More and more I find travelling irritating. Old age has drained any feeling of adventure out of me. Also I've always disliked staying with friends, and if I can do so without offence I always stay in a hotel – sadly not usually a five-star hotel – nearby. Jim Crossland moved from Bournemouth to France – not far from a major disaster for me as my visits to Bournemouth came to an end - but several times I flew to Tours airport and then by train on to Angers to see him. Jim's friend Susie Burrows twice entertained both Valerie and me in her villa near Uzès in Provence. By an extraordinary coincidence her father, Reginald Burrows, was a British diplomat and preceded my father as consul-general in Saigon in the 1960s.

My nephews and nieces have slowly become more important to me. A long time ago now – in about 2005 – Valerie and I began asking my nephew Simon's children, Thomas and Emily, to a Christmas play or musical as soon as we felt they were old enough. Usually we ate in Chinatown afterwards, or sometimes in a pizza restaurant, assuaging Thomas's liking for pizzas. I usually hate musicals, but it was a small penance to sit through them as long as they enjoyed them. Later Thomas and Emily liked different things, so we booked for two shows and then met afterwards for dinner. Later still the children's taste inevitably matured, until together we began to see plays such as *The Inspector Calls* which Valerie and I actually enjoyed. Nowadays they often choose the plays. Even more recently my niece's elder son, Samuel, has suddenly decided he likes classical music and opera. Who could have predicted this? I saw two very different operas, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, up at Leeds in 2019 when Samuel started at university there. Perhaps he'll surpass me in his tastes and one day drag me or, better, some unsuspecting new girlfriend to Wagner's Ring. If she comes back for more after *Das Rheingold*, she must be in love – or an utter Wagner freak.

If he does so history will be repeated, but in reverse. When my mother taught English in Magdeburg in the early 1930s, a German beau invited her to *Tristan and Isolde*, the first opera she ever saw, in the local opera house. She found it dull and much too long; like me, she preferred Mozart. I hope Samuel has better luck.

So sometimes lives do repeat themselves, but never in exactly the same way. When I was 10 my father took me to see Chaldon church, 4 miles away from here, with its scary murals on its west wall dating from the early Middle Ages explaining very graphically what happens if you disobey God's laws. I was much frightened, and calmed only by my parents' reassuring touch and their

promise that I would certainly never commit such crimes. Now I am not scared at all by these medieval artistic fumbblings, but still feel on edge in the church. Much – but really very little - human time has passed since I was there 65 years ago, and very little further time will have passed before I cease to exist. What have I done with my life? More important, what should I do with my life? The answer surely is to try and be calm and do one or two constructive acts each day. Voltaire, that do-gooding rascal, was right: cultivate one's garden!

I've not referred as much to my stammer in the latter part of this memoir, partly through a certain distaste in discussing it, but also because it has not varied much in its often upsetting unpredictable variability over the years. A stressful conversation, particularly over the phone usually but not always makes things worse. I certainly do not resemble that fine author Nicholas Mosley, whose stammer disappeared when he had to bark swift orders in the war; he won the Military Cross in the Italian campaign. But, other than that, its intensity waxes and wanes month by month in ways that usually seem quite unconnected with outside events. The prospect of a speech frightens me greatly, but when I actually make one, a rare event, I do not perform badly. My greatest success was in a hotel in Folkestone where I was trying to raise money for the British Stammering Association, but of course there I was almost expected to stammer, and perhaps disappointed some people when I didn't. A reading I was asked to do at Owen Simon's funeral was also stammer-free. Ironically I think Owen's twin brother Richard was a little disappointed by this.

Attending that funeral in the early summer of 2018 showed me that I needed to live my life in a different way. Friends continued to be important, but I tried to live inside myself much more and be less dependent on others. Of course I should grieve, but I should try to look forward too. So, up to a point, I was prepared for the coming of the coronavirus in March 2020. As many have remarked, an autobiography cannot have a settled end. So here I am, in that same drawing room. Everything is unchanged outside, except that it is now very early in 2024, almost three slothful years after I started writing this. Valerie and I had the corona virus and survived. Our lime tree, actually Croydon Council's lime tree, is three years older and though doubtless slightly taller, looks exactly the same. Some things have changed. Valerie's mother died peacefully here at home, probably from the virus, a few days before her 99th birthday. Although part of me misses her more than I'd expected, I'm content that Valerie, with her Parkinson's, a daily saddening burden, is relieved from the extra burden of caring for her. My brother had a terrible fall in his house and had to move to a nursing home where, because of the virus, all we can do is talk ineffectually with many onerous conditions attached. Finally, in the summer of 2022, he died quite suddenly.

My Czech friend Martin has been suffering from cancer since the summer of 2019 and after enduring immense suffering, shared necessarily by his wife, is now still alive after surviving three separate forms of cancer with their attendant chemotherapy treatments at a hospital in Olomouc. Most evenings I Skype him in his home in Litovel and hope for the best. My friend Roy Tranckle is dead, and tremblingly but successfully I gave an oration at his funeral. The three musketeers of Owen Simon, Roy and myself have been dispersed and I, the eldest, am left to mourn my friends. Lewes is a ghost town when I walk around it.

But, in the midst of all this, one most important event occurred: I asked Valerie to marry me and she agreed. My lack of self-esteem in matters of the heart is such that quite a large part of me was surprised by this.

Our friends' and relatives' enthusiastic reaction to this much surprised us. We found we had to hold two parties: one the traditional wedding breakfast for our relatives and a second party, a few weeks later, for our friends. We had astounding luck with the weather, and our balcony with the garden beyond finally came into its own after 10 years when the presence of Valerie's ailing mother and the succeeding lockdown had made such events impossible.

Parties are odd events. I can recall almost nothing of what happened during them. Who did I talk to? How well was the food and drink served? All I can remember of the wedding breakfast was a joke I told at which my great-niece Emily laughed, and later sitting on chairs in the hall and talking to my cousins Philip and Stephen and their wives Pat and Rachel. All the fascinating interplay between people who had necessarily not met for a long time was lost on me. We spent our wedding night in the old Croydon airport hotel on the Purley Way nearby while Valerie's cousin's son David, his wife Ruth and their three children Adam, Nell and Josie slept in our house. By the time we returned the following day they had, amazingly, cleared up almost all the party mess.

I miss the presence of young children in our lives. They revivify so many aspects of elderly life by their presence and are charmingly unconscious that they do so. Hearing the talk around David and Ruth's dining table when we visited them near Hexham the year before reminded me of all those years ago when my brother and my family sat around the card table on Sunday evenings playing whist. The repartee was much better than the whist, and occasionally the conversation ascended into something higher, something almost profound. And now I, the youngest, am quite properly the only one left.

What will the future – *our* future - bring? You, the reader, may one day know. I never can. And of course your actual tomorrows will always remain a mystery to you, which is a sort of revenge, a very unsatisfactory revenge, that the dead play on the living. Chopin once is supposed to have said: "Play Mozart after I'm dead, and I will hear you." Alas he was wrong. Speak to me, and I will never hear you. But conjure up in your mind the memory of a dead friend or relative you love or respect, and the mirror into which you may be looking may dissolve, and something may emerge slowly into the light. And the most wonderful thing about this? That vision will not be you. Fleeting, so fleetingly, the joys of apartness will be yours.

I thought at one time of placing at the beginning of this essay a melancholy poem by Lawrence Binyon, whose most famous poem is quoted every day by people who have never heard of him. But now I will end this little prose escapade with a happier poem by him, written I am sure about his wife in their old age, probably during the horrors of the Second World War. He died in 1943. When I lie side by side with Valerie its sentences often whisper into my mind, even though actual sleep may be far away:-

Stars beyond number or imagination

Silent in the sky;

Shadowy valleys and dark woods over them

Still, without a sigh;

A house, lost in vastness and in silence,

With no house nigh;

A room apart, with not a whisper in it

As the hours steal by:

Sleeping in our star-surrounded darkness,

You and I.