

knotty problem of identifying an English boarding school with a good academic reputation into which an overindulged American child (according to the British, all American children are overindulged) could be inserted with minimal trauma. They came up with two suggestions: Winchester, and Millfield, a coeducational progressive school in Somerset. The former was, and is, one of the most prestigious British public schools, with a formidable intellectual reputation. But my parents may have felt that its traditional character would prove too oppressive for the likes of me. In any case, the Winchester authorities would almost certainly have insisted that I take a fearsome examination in pursuit of securing an entrance scholarship which would provide a very necessary reduction of fees. By contrast, Millfield's unorthodox headmaster R.J.O. "Jack" Meyer was willing to offer me a scholarship virtually on the spot, simply on the basis of my U.S. high school record and putative prodigism. An offer of such impulsive generosity—characteristic of the man, as I was later to realize—could hardly be refused. His willingness to take risks was to change my life.

Jack Meyer, known to his pupils and associates as "The Boss", was an amazing character, a Diaghilev, a P. T. Barnum, and a Thomas Arnold rolled into one. His controversial, but remarkable pedagogical career had begun in 1935 with the tutoring of a clutch of Indian princes whom he had brought to Mill Field, a Victorian house set in extensive grounds on the edge of Street, a small town in central Somerset. Under his vigorous direction this enterprise had gradually expanded, first into a school for individual tuition, and then into a fully-fledged public school. Meyer had been an outstanding sportsman in his youth and his school reflected the fact: the place teemed with aspiring tennis-players and swimmers, golfers and athletes, some of whom, for example Mary Bignal and David Hemery, went on to win Olympic gold medals. Meyer's pedagogical philosophy was a curious blend of the progressive and the conservative. He opened his doors to dyslexics and other public school rejects and yet at the same time stoutly defended the use of the cane. Like a latter-day Robin Hood, he would demand outrageous fees from rich parents (which gained for Millfield the reputation of being the "most expensive school in Britain") so as to enable him to give full scholarships to talented children from poor families. (He was once quoted as saying that "I don't mind taking money off the rich. If I didn't have it they'd only spend it on drink or motor-cars or something.") These wealthy parents included a number of

double-barrelled names of such surpassing absurdity as "Hore-Belisha", "Ormsby-Gore", and (one speculates) "Stuff-Nonsense", it later seemed perfectly possible that "Gabbitas-Thring" was a single surname. However, an Internet search has shown that the firm now goes by the distinctly less inspiring, if more descriptive name "Gabbitas Educational Consultants". This would seem to indicate that Mr. Thring was a separate personage whose name was finally jettisoned.

PERPETUAL MOTION

celebrities, for example Elizabeth Taylor, who sent her sons there, although this was after my time². Sadly, Meyer's audacity was eventually to prove his undoing. He had always been attracted to the gaming tables, and in 1970 it came to the attention of the school's governors, to whom he had himself entrusted the administration of his school, that he had been playing the casinos with parents' fees. Upon being asked by them as to whether this rumour had any substance, Meyer is reputed to have replied, with disarming insouciance, "Of course." But despite the fact that his flutters had paid off handsomely, thereby generating additional revenue for the school, the governors did not find this acceptable, and replaced him, thus bringing his long tenure at Millfield to an abrupt and somewhat ignominious end³.

But I was to learn of all this much later. Meanwhile I was poised to undergo the metamorphosis into proper English public schoolboy. I cannot recall exactly how I felt about this at the time. It seems likely that my indwelling fear of separation from my parents was outweighed by the promise of new experience. I certainly did not anticipate the intensity of the homesickness that was to colour my first year at Millfield. Nor did I foresee my later sense of having lost irretrievably the freedom I had had, but failed to notice, when living with my family—a sense of loss that I came to learn is the usual result of passage to army, prison, or boarding school. But my failure to envisage all this was almost certainly a blessing. For had I envisaged it, I would likely have made enough of a fuss to cause my parents to think twice about the idea of sending me to Millfield, and in that case God only knows what would have become of me! In fact I missed home so much to begin with that on returning for my first school vacation I actually succeeded in persuading my parents not to send me back. But I soon came to accept that, as far as my schooling was concerned, returning to Millfield was the only sensible option, and so back I went.

² But I was to have my own brush with celebrity while at Millfield. While walking in the school grounds one afternoon, I saw the Boss sitting on a garden bench next to a swarthy man sporting a white suit and dark glasses. Boss beckoned me over to meet his companion. This turned out to be Aristotle Onassis, who I later learned was considering whether to send his son to the school. In the end it seems he decided against it, however.

³ In a letter written to me in 1991 Joyce Linfoot had the following to say concerning the affair:

As for [Meyer's] gambling, I am forced to believe that too, and having been a college bursar for twelve years, I must support the official view that to gamble with other people's money is a crime. I will only say that I can understand it, and in mitigation, I am sure that he was confident that if he did lose, he would ultimately be able to repay. He had always been able to get people to give him money when it was really needed. But it looks as though he didn't completely realize what he had done by turning the school into a Trust. The place was so much his own creation that it would have been hard to avoid the feeling that "L'école, c'est moi."

I can recall only vaguely the period between our departure from the United States in the summer of 1958 and my arrival at Millfield the following September. Yet it must have been crowded with incident, for during those few months we travelled first from San Francisco to Tripoli via London, and later my mother and I returned to England to install me in school. Fortunately (or unfortunately) for my efforts at reminiscing, our itinerary, at least, can be reconstructed by means of the numerous visas and official stamps decorating the pages of my cancelled American passport of that time (still in my possession), whose number, 1017976, has, for some reason, remained in my memory. This passport, issued on June 17, 1958, and bearing the crabbed signature of John Foster Dulles⁴, the then American Secretary of State, is a representative official U.S. document of the day. On p. 5, for example, one is sternly reminded that

This passport is not valid for travel to the following areas under control of authorities with which the United States does not have diplomatic relations: Albania, ~~Bulgaria~~, and those portions of China, Korea and Viet-Nam under Communist control.

As a piece of diplomatic effrontery the implied identification of the People's Republic of China as a mere "portion" of China deserves the palm!

From what I take to be an admission stamp on p. 7 of the passport, we arrived at Southampton on the 15th of July. It would seem to follow that we crossed the Atlantic by boat, a voyage I have almost entirely forgotten. Thinking back, the ship's name, *Liberté*, occurs to me, but nothing more: this is unfortunate because it was to be the last of my family's sea voyages. On the same page of the passport is to be found a stamp of embarkation, marked "London Airport, 28 July 1958". Accordingly we must have spent the intervening couple of weeks in England. I remember my mother taking me to Barker's of Kensington, a "departmental" store (in the British terminology of the day), to be fitted out with the various items of clothing and kit specified by the school authorities. These included a "stout" pair of black boots or shoes, a pair of plimsolls—tennis shoes in the U.S.—six grey shirts, several pairs of grey flannel trousers, a couple of tweed sports jackets, a navy blue blazer, a dozen pairs of grey wool socks; sheets, pillowcases, and towels; something called a spongebag which proved to contain, not a sponge, but a toothbrush and a face-flannel; a sewing-kit (known as a "housewife" and pronounced "hussif"), a shoe-cleaning kit; a woollen dressing-gown and a woollen blanket called a "rug" (both provided in

⁴ Whose place in history is undoubtedly ensured as having been the target of the quip "Dull, Duller, Dulles".

necessary defense against the arctic conditions prevailing in British school dormitories, and, as I was later to learn, in British bedrooms generally), a lockable wooden box in which to store one's "tuck", and, as a finishing touch, the Book of Common Prayer. My mother also bought a capacious trunk in which to pack everything, apart, of course, from the tuck-box. As far as the contents of the latter was concerned, the reading of numerous Billy Bunter stories as a child had familiarized me with the fact that English public schoolboys were continually "tucking in", and that the term "tuck" was intended to signify something edible. But for all I knew "tuck" might turn out to include the dreaded frogspawn and spotted dick—so-called edibles stretching the category of the edible beyond recognition—that had plagued my mother's schooldays. I was greatly relieved to find that my own tuck-box came to be packed with nothing more noxious than Fry's and Cadbury's chocolate, and Callard and Bowser's toffee.

The school insisted, not unreasonably, that a nametag be attached to each item of clothing—sewn rather than ironed, it went without saying. The traditional name-tapes (surely familiar to my mother) were, I recall, Cash's Woven Names. I can envisage the frosty response of the sales-clerk at Barker's—impersonated, perhaps, by Cecil Parker or Dennis Price—to the idea of requiring speedy delivery of an article whose very wovenness necessitated that it be ordered long in advance: "No, madam, *quite* impossible before next Michaelmas. Perhaps a bottle of indelible ink ...?" And so it was that my dear mother was reduced first to the absurd labour of inscribing "John L. Bell" over and over—with old-fashioned penholder and nib—on a seemingly endless roll of cotton tape, and then to the even more tedious business of stitching the resulting home-made nametags onto the various articles of clothing which were to accompany her first-born on his journey into the unknown. The handwriting on these nametags was to be a moving reminder of my mother while she was still alive and yet when I, parted from her at school, could scarcely contain my tears: decades later, after her death, I am still moved to see my name inscribed in her hand on the nametag attached to the woollen rug, one of the few articles that remains from that period of my life.

As I have said, my passport attests that we left London, bound presumably for Tripoli, on 28 July. Judging from the numerous Libyan visas, official stamps, and random inscriptions in Arabic which adorn its pages (examples above), passage through the eye of the proverbial needle would seem to have offered less of a challenge than admission to (and, apparently, departure from) the United Kingdom of Libya, as it was known in those pre-Ghaddafi days. While my family remained in Libya for the best part of a year, I spent just two school vacations there, a total of only about three months. But certain impressions and incidents have remained with me. I recall, for instance, the

Mediterranean climate with its dry hot sunny days and cool starry nights—so much more pleasant than the taxing equatorial conditions of Thailand! I also recall family trips to the ancient Roman cities of Sabratha and Leptis Magna, which had been recently excavated. The latter, large enough to lose one's way in, was particularly impressive. Even more impressive was the locust swarm of Biblical dimensions which, darkening the sky, descended on us as we drove away from the place. The density of the swarm was sufficient to clog the car's windshield wipers and cause my father (no doubt muttering "son of a *bitch!*") to stop the car and sit the visitation out.

My father's employers H.T. Smith International had, so I understood, been engaged to develop Libya's water resources, a task which, considering that the country is 90% desert, would tax the capacities of a Poseidon, let alone those of an H. T. Smith. I recall my father telling me that in desperation he had engaged the services of a local dowser, and that the man had indeed located a natural spring in the middle of the desert. While the sceptic would ascribe the miracle of discovery to previous knowledge on the dowser's part, the point was to find water—it mattered not how. Unfortunately, the source, while unquestionably genuine, turned out to be nothing more than a trickle, hardly the torrent whose production had presumably been H. T. Smith International's original commission. I also recall my father pointing out to me how the chieftain of some village we had come across on one of our desert trips had exercised his feudal right by walling off the local well, obliging the villagers to pay a fee for the privilege of quenching their thirst. That was, as I later realized, privatization with a vengeance!

Libya had been an Italian colony in the 1930s, coming under British military administration after the defeat of Italy during World War II. In 1951 it became an independent nation with a monarch, King Idris I (later, of course, to be overthrown by Colonel Ghaddafi). In the 1950s the Libyan people understandably harboured a certain resentment against Europeans—and by association, Americans. I only learned of this resentment when my father told us that someone (a Libyan, presumably) had lit a fire under the gasoline tank of one of H.T.'s trucks and blown it skyhigh. I found this quite disturbing because all the Libyans I had met had impressed me as friendly and open. (In particular my whole family had become very fond of Mohammed Zarti, our charming and gentle resident houseboy.) But this knowledge induced caution, as the following episode shows. One evening I was sitting next to my father at a cinema in Tripoli, waiting for the film to start. As the lights dimmed, a man came and sat down next to me on the other side. A few minutes later I was startled by an unpleasant tickling sensation on my upper leg—like most boys of my age, I was wearing shorts. I suddenly realized, at first with surprise, then with repugnance, that the man was furtively stroking my leg.

Naturally my first impulse was to tell him to cut it out. But then the thought flashed through my mind that my father would become involved, perhaps getting into a fight with the man, who, as a Libyan, would certainly have the support of most of the audience. So, with uncharacteristic diplomacy, I turned to my father and quietly suggested that we move elsewhere, giving the plausible reason that the person immediately in front was blocking my view. Grumbling, my father agreed, and as a result we were spared (so I believed) the nasty imbroglio conjured up in my imagination.

On a frivolous note, I associate our sojourn in Libya with a number of absurd “routines” which, forty years on, it still amuses me to trot out. For instance: “Tripoli, Libya” became the tongue-tripping “Triplilibli”. And astonishment rapidly gave way to hysteria when I saw an ad containing the immortal words:

Everyting for Beach. Including Dink Toys and Infatable Mattresses⁵

My mother’s life also had its amusing side, amusing, at least, to my sister and me. As an attractive woman my mother had turned a few heads locally. One especially persistent fellow—who came to be known to us as her “suitor”—entertained the curious notion that the proffering of eggs and flowers would suffice to sweep her off her feet—and thence, presumably, into his arms. Lynette and I summed up this character’s disappointment at the failure of these blandishments to achieve their object in the line: “I bring you eggies and flass, and you turn me down.”

One of my parents’ friends I recall from that time is Len Dawson, a rugged, engaging Englishman who had been a commando during World War II. I listened, spellbound, to his account of how, in a Japanese prison-camp, his interrogators, in an effort to induce him to talk, pumped water into his stomach and applied their boots thereon. With impressive sang-froid, he dismissed the affair with the airy remark that it had merely ruined his digestion. He and my mother seemed very affectionate, leading me to suspect that they might be lovers, a term familiar to me from the movies but of whose true meaning I had only the haziest notion. It came as something of a shock one night to have my suspicions confirmed. Len was staying with us for a few days and had been sleeping in the spare bedroom on the ground floor of the house. My father was away, doubtless in search of those elusive desert springs. Late one night I stole downstairs, quietly let myself out through the front door, and crept up to the open window of the spare room. Peering cautiously within, I could just discern Len and my

⁵ Lynette swears that the ad also includes a reference to “glass pants”, but, while this is perfectly possible, I cannot recall it. Many years later I mentioned this ad to a friend, who almost topped it with an ad for a hotel he had seen in a Greek newspaper, which boasted “comfortables beds, and blameless cleanless.”

mother lying on the bed smoking and talking in low voices, the scene inside illuminated intermittently by the intensified glow of a cigarette-end. Ashamed of having spied on them (a feeling of guilt whose traces are still present forty years on), I slunk back to bed, vowing to keep my mother's liaison to myself. I believe that she later began to suspect that I knew of her relationship with Len, and to fear that in an unguarded moment I might reveal her secret to my father. But this did not happen—nor will my father ever read the present lines!⁶

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In September my mother and I returned to Britain to get me settled in at Millfield. The school being situated a hundred miles or so west of London in what I later learned to refer to as deepest Somerset, a school train had been laid on to convey the returning pupils, as well as new bugs like myself, to the institution *en masse*. So we duly presented ourselves at Paddington Station, the London terminus of what had once been the Great Western Railway, but which had metamorphosed under nationalization into British Railways (Western Region)⁷. Here we found a congregation of boys, Millfielders all, one supposed, shouting farewells to their parents as they jostled their way onto the train. I cannot now recall the actual moment of departure, but as the train pulled out of the station, I fancy that, like the protagonist of some unwritten *Bildungsroman*, I was waving frantically at my mother, my emotions divided between excitement at the prospect of transition to a new stage of development and dismay at the act of severing the umbilical cord. Initially, at least, my fears must have been outweighed by the sheer *novelty* of the strange milieu in which I found myself. Although I had been born in Britain and so was a British subject in the legal sense, I had spent hardly any time in the country and what little knowledge I had of it derived almost entirely from reading. So I was struck by what seemed to my American eye the curiously old-fashioned details of British life, in particular by those offered by the railway. I was surprised to find, for example, that many British railway carriages lacked corridors, so that compartments, each equipped with individual doors, could only be changed by actually *leaving* the train. It followed that one's choice of compartment had to be made with especial discrimination, since, once the train was in motion, that choice, and, *a fortiori*, the disposition of one's travel companions, was irrevocable. No wonder the circumspect Englishman—as I was later to learn—prepared for an impending railway journey by arming himself with a copy of the

⁶ This was written before my father's death in 2003.

⁷ After the recent bleak years of wholesale privatization in Britain the railway is probably now called "Virgin Trains", or something equally fatuous.

Times behind which to retreat in case of miscalculation⁸! Another very British fixture—quaint but oddly practical—was the perforated leather strap attached to the compartment door whose function it was to hold up the window. A further oddity was the communication cord, which bore the ominous sign *Penalty for Improper Use* £5. Yanking the thing, it seemed, would signal to the engine driver to bring the train to a rapid halt. Why anyone should wish to do this escaped me at the time. It was not until I read Jack Meyer’s obituary some years later that the true function of the British communication cord was revealed to me. According to the published account, Meyer was travelling by train one night with the members of his cricket team, none of whom had eaten since breakfast. It is said that, with characteristic impulsiveness, he pulled the cord to get the train to stop at the next station where food might be obtained!

Meanwhile, the train, its engine belching smoke and cinders, laboured its way westward. After a few hours it drew into Castle Cary, the main line station closest to the school, where we were decanted into the fleet of coaches conveying us to the respective houses in which we were to live. I had been billeted, along with five other boys, at “Hill Home”, the family residence of R. G. Dickens, a teacher of French at the school. I spent my first year *in statu pupillari* at Hill Home, a microcosm through which, by a kind of refraction, I first became acquainted with the larger English society that was to be my world for the next three decades.

Hill Home was situated on the outskirts of Glastonbury, a small pleasant Somerset town which had originally been a Roman settlement; indeed the house itself sat on a narrow street called “The Roman Way.” Further along this street was to be found the famous Glastonbury Tor, a conical hill surmounted by a fourteenth century church tower. Glastonbury is reputed to have been the ancient Isle of Avalon—the Island of the Blest of Celtic legend to which King Arthur is believed to have withdrawn after his last battle. Glastonbury is also associated with St. Joseph of Arimathea, who is supposed to have brought the Holy Grail there in New Testament times; legend has it that the Glastonbury thorn, which flowers at Christmas, sprang from his staff.

On arriving at Hill Home, whose weathered gate amusingly bore the letters HILI HOMF, I found that I was to share a small dormitory with three boys, the remaining two occupying a tiny spare room across the landing. Mr. and Mrs. Dickens had a couple of kids of their own, so it was to be a tight squeeze! Accustomed as I had been to having a bedroom to myself, I was disturbed at first by the loss of privacy resulting from being obliged to share one. But I soon got used to that,

⁸ *The Times*’s recent (2005) shrinkage into tabloid form has now rendered it wholly inadequate for this purpose.

as well as to the regimented way in which life at a boarding school is organized, however progressive it may purport to be. In any case, these abridgments of freedom paled into insignificance alongside the homesickness—now so remote!—that dogged me throughout my first year at Millfield. Beneath my every waking hour ran an undercurrent of melancholy which would sometimes erupt in a flood of tears. Astonishing as it now seems to me, this could occur at the drop of a hat. I recall, for instance, suddenly beginning to blubber uncontrollably in the middle of a mathematics class. It was indicative of the essential benignity of the regime at the school that the master—in this case the estimable Captain Clarkson (R.N. *ret.*)—interrupted his instruction, took me outside, gave me a few words of comfort in his bluff way, and advised me to take the rest of the day off. I was a literal “wet” during my lachrymal first year at Millfield, but, with one exception to be described presently, I do not recall that my emotional sufferings were compounded by oppression of the sort often associated with traditional public schools.

So, despite my homesickness, I quickly adapted to the routine at “Hili Homf” (as it soon came to be known to us boys). At 7.30 a bang on the dormitory door by Mr. Dickens (who for some reason had come to be known to us boys as “Plunk”) roused us from our slumbers. We then had 20 minutes in which to perform our ablutions in sequence in the house’s solitary bathroom, and to struggle, shivering in the cold of the unheated dormitory, into our clothes, finally presenting ourselves in the small common room to listen respectfully to the 10 minute BBC radio program (me) “Lift Up Your Hearts” which served in lieu of morning prayers. As the pips heralding the 8 o’clock news sounded, we would troop downstairs to consume the substantial breakfast which Mrs. Dickens—“Madge”—laboured to serve up each morning. While my reading of British children’s literature had acquainted me with the term “porridge”, it had failed to provide sufficient preparation for the large plateful of glutinous grey substance with which we were actually confronted each day. However, mixed with milk and large quantities of sugar, and quickly consumed before it solidified on the plate, this concoction proved its worth on many a frosty morning. A fact of which I had been forewarned was the British taste for thick slices of cold toast, assembled in racks—“toast coolers”, was, I recall, my father’s derisory, but exact, term for them—whose form seemed indeed devised to cool each slice as rapidly as possible by exposing its surface to the chilly draft—euphemistically termed fresh air—coursing through the room. Madge would occasionally use toast to provide underpinning—not for the scrambled eggs or melted cheese with which I was familiar—but, of all things, baked beans—and at supper, in a combination more bizarre still, canned spaghetti. Who would have imagined that the “on toast” motif could be carried to such extremes?

Still, the bread from which the toast was made was superior by far to the U.S. variety. Madge would cut a pile of thick slabs, known as doorstops, from the loaf. These were of such solidity that, after a hungry bite, one's teeth could be extricated only with difficulty. (By contrast, the near-vacuum density of the average American sliced loaf of the period rendered the whole thing compressible into the space occupied by a single English doorstop.) New to me also were the rashers of unsmoked but nevertheless tasty bacon, "back" or "streaky", which accompanied the runny fried eggs Madge would sometimes dish up. Everything was washed down with numerous cups of hot sweet tea, "strong enough," as the expression went, "to stand a spoon up in."

Breakfast over, we would cycle the few miles into school. Perched on the overlarge machine my mother had bought for me (a "New Hudson", I think it was called) I presented a diminutive and somewhat pathetic figure, a fact which the other boys were quick to point out, with remarks such as "Johnny's bike's bigger than he is!", and the like. (This annoyed me, but at 5' 2" I had no choice but to admit to myself the essential truth of their taunts.) On arriving at the school grounds, the first thing one saw was the conglomeration, reminiscent of a camp for prisoners-of-war, of Nissen huts and long wooden shacks (known as chicken runs) that served as classrooms in those days. The first thing one heard were the prefects' shouts of "Run! Run!" to prod junior pupils like myself into getting to class punctually. I found this display of authority particularly irritating since, while we underlings were required to run to our classes, the prefects, like a party of *flâneurs* out for a stroll, merely ambled to theirs. At 11 o'clock the traditional break took place. Not being required to run during this period, we would make our way at our own pace to Millfield House, the rambling Victorian mansion which served both as headmaster's residence and centre of school operations. There we lined up in the house's forecourt to receive our "elevenses", which consisted of a half-pint bottle of red-top milk (the least creamy) and a currant bun. These were dispensed from an open window by the school matron, the sharp-eyed Miss Warner, or one of her deputies. Aspiring *Oliver Twists* reaching overhastily through the window for a second bun were firmly deterred by a brisk rap on the knuckles with a wooden spoon. During the remainder of "break" I would make my way to the common room of Millfield House, where a lively game of table tennis was usually in progress. I had played the game at home, and considered myself not wholly unskilled, but, inevitably, I was quite outclassed by the Millfield players. Of those I knew the best was a day-boy, Burgess by name, who attended the school on one of Boss's cricket scholarships. He would overwhelm his opponents with a dazzling array of backhand flicks, topspin forehands, and cunning chops, all delivered with impressive aplomb. In the sporting ambience of the place, my game could hardly

have failed to improve, but it never rose to anything near the standard of the better table-tennis players there.

At 12.30 morning classes ended and we would cycle back to Hill Home for “dinner”, i.e., lunch. As the most substantial meal of the day, Madge (how overworked she must have been, poor woman!) laboured mightily to satisfy the appetites of six growing boys. This was achieved largely through the provision of vast mounds of boiled, or, occasionally, baked potatoes. One strange concoction that she dished up, toad-in-the-hole—uncomfortably close, nominally at least, to spotted dick and frogspawn—consisted of a number of sausages embedded in a mass of undercooked Yorkshire pudding. Then there were the curious brown cubes of baked mincemeat and offal known as faggots. These, although shorter than the pieces of kindling used for lighting fires, were not appreciably more edible. Finally came dessert, or “afters”. It was this stage of the proceedings that I came to dread, for I found it embarrassing to refuse something that the others obviously enjoyed, with the implied slur on their taste. But the various warm milk puddings of rice (and even macaroni), topped with nutmeg, regarded as delicacies by the rest of the company, really did nauseate me (and still do). And even the steamed “puds”, in themselves not unpalatable, were rendered completely inedible by submersion in Bird’s Creamy Custard, a noxious yellow fluid which, instead of “bringing out the flavour”—as its advertisements proclaimed—had in my estimation precisely the opposite effect.

I recall parenthetically that my manner of manipulating the cutlery caused me to become the unwelcome object of attention at mealtimes. As an American I had learned to cut with the right hand and then transfer the fork to the same hand. Not unnaturally this laborious operation attracted the derision of the other boys, who as Englishmen had been schooled always to keep the fork in the left hand, knife in the right. To silence the ridicule I adopted the latent left-hander’s expedient of retaining the fork in my right hand, and the knife in my left. It has remained my method of wielding knife and fork to this day.

After lunch we would make our way back to Millfield for the afternoon session. On our return to Hili Homf in the evening we would sit down to a light supper, which normally took the form of a salad and hard-boiled eggs, accompanied by the customary heap of doorstops. It was there that I first encountered salad cream, a kind of ersatz mayonnaise. I was nonplussed to see everybody proceed not only to pour lashings of this viscous fluid over their eggs and salad, but even to spread their doorstops with it. To such lunacy I resolved never to succumb. Packets of Smith’s so-called Crisps—limp greenish discs of spud masquerading as potato chips—would sometimes also accompany the meal. These were, I recall, to be salted using the contents of a twist of blue paper thoughtfully provided by the manufacturers. On

untwisting the paper one invariably found that the salt had coagulated into a number of lumps, rendering it totally useless for its intended purpose.

Supper finished, we had an hour or so to ourselves before sitting down at the cramped common-room table to do our “prep”, the work we were required to prepare for class the following day. We would scribble away in silence, our elbows in continual collision, under the bleak and inadequate illumination provided by the single naked light bulb suspended over the table. It now seems to me little short of miraculous that anything got done under such conditions. (But apparently it did. In those days, and at that tender age, one put up with anything!) I cannot recall that Hili Homf boasted any form of central heating—it would seem unlikely—but if it did what little there may have been failed to extend to the common room. Instead it was furnished with a paraffin heater, which achieved its effect through the emission of a warm soporific fug. Every five minutes or so this contraption emitted a soft gurgling sound, providing a delicate accompaniment to the scratching of our pens. At the conclusion of prep Plunk conducted evening prayers. Heads bowed, we stood while he intoned from the Book of Common Prayer. My slender hold on religious belief had already begun to loosen before my arrival at Millfield and exposure to Anglican ritual did little to arrest the process. But St. Ignatius of Loyola’s prayer still echoes in my memory after all these years:

*Teach us, good Lord, to serve thee as thou deservest;
to give and not to count the cost;
to fight and not to heed the wounds;
to toil, and not to seek for rest;
to labour, and to ask for no reward,
save that of knowing that we do thy will;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

After prayers we made ready for bed, with “lights out” at 10.

In the common room there was a small bookcase containing a number of paperbacks. One day I happened to pull out the Penguin edition of the *Collected Short Stories of E. M. Forster*, a writer with whom I was not then familiar. Idly leafing through the book, I was intrigued to discover a story with the title *The Machine Stops*. This looked like it might be science fiction, and sure enough it was. Gripped from the first page, I read it at a sitting. Forster’s dystopian story, written in 1909 and his one venture into SF is a powerful depiction of the tragic consequences of becoming overdependent on the machine. It had a great impact on me.

I struck up friendships with three of my fellow inmates at Hili Homf: D. J. Partridge, F. G. F. Howard and R. N. Lawrence. David

Partridge, slightly younger than I, was very clever, and full of fun. Although the red-haired Nigel Lawrence was not much bigger than I, he was senior to the rest of us and so had been placed in charge. He took his position of authority with an unabashed seriousness that struck the rest of us as ludicrous, leading to taunts of “Nigel’s niggled,” and the like. He had a small notebook in which he recorded our transgressions: these included such serious misdeeds as “deliberate cheek” (talking back) and failure to clean the bathtub after use. Once a miscreant had acquired sufficiently many black marks he would be obliged to do additional household chores such as washing up (dishwashing) and peeling potatoes. Geoff Howard and I found that we shared a taste for classical music, and quickly became mates. Geoff had a ready wit and a way with words, a talent which would occasionally backfire on him. I recall, for instance, that he had taken to teasing one of my dorm members, Chadwick (known, inevitably, as “Chadders”), a strapping young fellow whose parents ran a dairy farm in Cheshire. Chadwick occasionally received a Cheshire cheese in the post, which he would generously share with the entire household. Geoff found the alliteration of the name “Chadwick” with “Cheshire” and “cheese” downright irresistible. One day he came up with a wicked parody of the old Jerome Kern song “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”, which began:

*They asked me how I knew
Chadders’ cheese was blue.
I of course replied:
That it’s gone bad inside
Cannot be denied.*

This was the last straw for poor Chadwick. He jumped on Geoff and gave him a good thrashing. This, of course, counted as a transgression and was duly entered in Lawrence’s notebook. Geoff would also keep us in stitches by mimicking Madge’s Irish accent, producing ridiculous lines such as “Would youse be afther passin’ along the spuds,” and the like. I feel certain that Madge must have overheard him, because they never seemed to get along very well.

Actually I felt a certain sympathy with Madge on the matter of accent, since my American pronunciation made me the subject of a good deal of ribbing by the other boys. I learned at first hand the truth of Oscar Wilde’s remark that Britain and America are separated, not just by an ocean, but also by a common language. It was inevitable that I would be mocked for using a long *a* where a Britisher (from the South at least) would normally employ a short one: as in *can’t*, *dance*, *glance*, *advance*, etc. And also for using a short *e* where a long one was

prescribed: as in *economics*, *predecessor*, and the like. Subtler, however, were the differences in syllabic stress. For example, in a disyllabic phrase such as “ice cream”, as an American I naturally placed the

stress on the first syllable. But I learned that in British English the stress was normally placed on the second syllable. In vain I pointed out that this displacement of accent would reduce the old American ice-cream line to gibberish—can you imagine chanting I *scream*, you *scream*, we all *scream* for ice *cream*?

My pronunciation of such words as *aris'tocrat*, *evident'ly*, *cor'ollary*, *ad'dress* also seemed to strike the other boys as amusing. It was not long before I, too, was saying *a'ristocrat*, *e'vidently*, *corol'lary*, *address'*, which is the way I still pronounce these words today. I made a virtue of necessity by actually coming to prefer pronunciations such as these. On the other hand I found myself resisting the pressure to become completely Anglicized, feeling in some unarticulated way that to remain a “foreigner” would help me retain my own identity, and serve to confirm, to myself at least, my independence of character. (So, for example, I continued to pronounce the word “schedule” as “skedule” in the American manner, rather than succumbing to the British “shehdule”.) While I could hardly claim to be standing at an angle to the universe as a whole, at least I could congratulate myself on my resistance to local parallelism! In any case, even if I had wished to, I could never have passed as an Englishman born and bred, since the sound of the long English *a* never came naturally to me. But, as I was to learn, it mattered not, since, according to Daniel Defoe,

*A true-born Englishman's a contradiction!
In speech an irony! in fact, a fiction!*

And as a true-born Englishman himself, he should know!

The telling differences between British and American terminology also played a role in my English education. I learned, for instance, that normal English usage prescribed *pavement* for the U.S. *sidewalk*; *post* for *mail*; *chemist's* for *drugstore*; *mackintosh* for *raincoat*; *trousers* for *pants*; *pants* for *underpants*; *wireless* for *radio*; *chap* or *bloke* for *guy*; *lorry* for *truck*; *boot* for *trunk*; *windscreen* for *windshield*; *windcheater* for *windbreaker* (but *cheat* for *cheater*); *aluminium* for *aluminum*; *gramophone* for *phonograph*; *dinner jacket* for *tuxedo*; *maths* for *math*; *break* for *recess*; *railway* for *railroad*; *goods wag(g)on* for *boxcar*; *tap* for *faucet*; *halt* for *stop*; *coach* for *bus*; *flex* for *cord*; *in just a tick* for *momentarily*; *momentarily* for *for just an instant*; *traffic light* for *traffic signal*; *underground* for *subway*; *aeroplane* for *airplane* (etc.); *lift* for *elevator*; *jumper* for *sweater*; *marquee* for *large tent*; *Hoover* for *vacuum cleaner*; *the bog* for *the john*; *bum* or *arse* for *ass*; *fag* for *cigarette*; *sweet*

for *candy* or *dessert*; *dinner* for *lunch*; *supper* for *dinner*; *clot* for *idiot*; *jolly good* for *great*; *gateau* for *layer cake*; *advert* for *ad*; *solicitor* for *lawyer*; *biscuit* for *cookie*; *packet* for *pack*; *settee* for *sofa*; *drawing room* for *living room*; *W.C.* for *toilet*; *ill* for *sick*; *sick* for *throwing up*; *specs* for *glasses*; *ice* for *ice cream*; *sweets* for *candy*; *the cinema* or *the flicks* for *the movies*; *joint* for *roast*; *the idiot box* for *the boob tube*; *form* for *bench*; *rubber* for *eraser*; *drawing pin* for *thumbtack*; *washing up* for *doing the dishes*; *sport* for *sports*; *draughts* for *checkers*; *nought* for *zero*; *zed* for *zee*; *noughts and crosses* for *tic-tac-toe*; *to pressurize* for *to pressure*; *half an hour* for *a half-hour*; *fortnight* for *two weeks*; *wimpy* for *hamburger*; *chip* for *french fry*; *potato crisp* for *potato chip*; and finally, the terminology of the telephone: *telephone kiosk* for *phone booth*; “*trunks*” for *long distance*, *engaged* for *busy*, and, particularly tickling to an American ear, “*are you there?*” for “*hello*”.

Thinking back, the term “telephone kiosk” evokes an image of a sturdy red booth with a solid door opened only with difficulty. On entering one was assailed by the distinct odour of urine associated with the common use of these structures as *pissoirs*. Inside was a bulky black box topped with a bakelite telephone receiver, equipped with two chromium-plated protuberances identified as buttons *A* and *B*, together with a slot into which four of the massive copper pennies of the day were to be inserted. As each coin was rammed in one heard it drop with a metallic clunk into the guts of the mechanism, there to await, after dialling the call, either its engorgement on pushing button *A*—if one had the good fortune to effect a connection—or, in the opposite event, its return on pushing button *B*. In the former case, one usually heard through the telephone receiver, not the customary “Hello”, but, after the ritual “Are you there?”, the frantically repeated injunction “Push button *A!* Push button *A!*” As often as not this would have the effect of causing the caller (certainly it did me), through a kind of reflex action, to press button *B*, thereby returning the coins and leading to a reiteration of the whole absurd procedure.

Then there was the colourful terminology for the coinage: *farthing* (“fourthing”, i.e. quarter penny) *ha’penny*, *thrupenny bit*, *tanner* (sixpence), *bob* (shilling, or one-twentieth of a pound), *florin* (two shillings) *half-crown* (two shillings and sixpence). Two pennies were *tuppence*, and so, by analogy, I figured that no pennies should be *nuppence*, as in “no pounds no shillings and nuppence”. Like everybody else, I learned how to calculate with the antique, but remarkably flexible ventigesimal-duodecimal system still in place at the time, and which was only to be swept into oblivion by the decimalization of British currency in the late sixties. Thus, for example, one quickly came to recognize that a third of a pound was six shillings and eightpence (*six and eight*, denoted 6/8). And that 1/9 was one-twelfth of a *guinea* or “snob’s pound”, worth 21 shillings. This knowledge is

PERPETUAL MOTION

now about as useful as the ability to calculate with doubloons, but there is no denying its value as a currency of nostalgia.

When I had begun to grasp the differences between American and British usage I saw that I was in the fortunate position of being able, on occasion, to tailor my choice of terms to fit the immediate situation. Thus if a mild parody at attempting to fit in seemed called for, I could say, for example, "Be a good chap and bung over that packet of crisps, won't you?", or "The flicks? Jolly good idea!". Eventually my speech settled into the mid-Atlantic form in which it has remained to this day. As a result, I have become used to being taken for a Brit or a Canadian in the United States; in Britain, for an American or a Canadian; now finally in Canada, for an Americanized Brit.

Certain details of life at Hili Homf still stand out in my recollection. Table polishing, for instance. In this bizarre ritual one of the boys was grabbed by the others and stretched out on the common-room table. His hands and feet firmly held, he would then be swung violently back and forth across the table until he begged for mercy. It seems surprising in retrospect that none of the victims sustained serious injury. Another prank was the making of so-called apple-pie beds. Here the bed of one of the boys would, without his knowing it, be remade during the day with the top sheet folded over. On leaping into his bed that night, the unwary victim's feet would rip through the folded sheet, to the great amusement of the wheeze's perpetrators.

Mr. Dickens occasionally gave some of us a lift to school in his Morris Minor. He took great pride in this vehicle, describing it with proprietary satisfaction as "the ideal family car in many ways." This struck us boys as risible and so we naturally began to use the phrase, *mutatis mutandis*, whenever possible. Thus the Dickens's television set became "the ideal family television in many ways," their cat "the ideal family cat in many ways," and, inevitably, the Dickens household itself "the ideal family family in many ways."

Memorable also was the farcical incident involving the younger of the two Dickens children, Colin, that took place on a Sunday afternoon. One of us (I forget who) had decided to touch up his bicycle with a dab of black paint, and had carelessly left the open can on a ledge near the bicycle shed. Wandering about unattended in the garden, the hapless child came across the can and proceeded to deposit its contents all over himself. On finding him covered with black paint, his mother understandably emitted a howl of rage and shouted for her husband, causing the latter to storm up the stairs and burst furiously into the common room where a number of us were idling away the afternoon. The long curved scar on Mr. Dickens's forehead (a war wound, I believe) had gone alarmingly crimson, and he appeared close to apoplexy. But he calmed down sufficiently to subject us to an orderly interrogation,

inducing the culprit (whoever it was) to own up and submit to condign punishment.

At the weekend we were permitted access to the ideal family television. I was enthralled by *Quatermass and the Pit*, Nigel Kneale's terrifying TV serial (later made into a creditable movie). I also recall watching my first Wimbledon final, the one in which Neal Fraser defeated Rod Laver. No weekend was complete without its complement of card games such as whist and "chase the lady". Weekends also meant long bicycle rides in the pleasant countryside around Glastonbury, which was peppered with hamlets bearing such curious names as Rurtle, Hornblotton Green and Mudgley.

On Sunday we were all required to attend chapel at the local Anglican church. Geoff Howard and I had cultivated a somewhat irreverent attitude to organized religion. I recall that we were both amused by the contents of the explanatory leaflet distributed before the start of the service, being especially tickled by the defining of "Amen" as "That's just what I wanted to say." So we decided to use that phrase whenever the congregation was called upon to utter "Amen". We kept up this jest throughout an entire service, receiving a number of odd looks from the vicar.

On alternate weekends the strange ritual known as "Corps" took place, in which the boys of the whole school would don military uniform and earnestly march about in a kind of caricature of regular army maneuvers. When I first arrived at Millfield I feared that I, too, might have to engage in this nonsense, but fortunately I noticed the clause in my passport asserting that "it is not valid for travel to or in any foreign state for the purpose of entering or serving in the armed forces of such a state." I reasoned that if the school governors really took their cadet force (or farce) seriously, they would regard it as being genuinely part of the British armed forces, in which case they would acknowledge that by joining it I would be violating the conditions laid down by the American consular authorities. This line of reasoning must have been substantially correct, because I was spared all squarebashing at Millfield.

Living across the street from Hili Homf was a pleasant middle-aged lady with whom I struck up a friendship. Her house was called "The Galileian", which from my reading of Einstein I took to mean an inertial coordinate system. I could not fathom why a house should be named after a coordinate system, inertial or otherwise, and so one day I asked the lady for an explanation. She responded that she knew nothing about coordinate systems, but that "The Galileian" was another name for Jesus Christ. A distinguished coordinate system indeed! I recall that she was a devotee of Yoga and had a considerable number of books on the subject, two of which, entitled "Jnana Yoga" and "Hatha

Yoga” she pressed on me, insisting that I read them. I did my best, but I am afraid that I have forgotten what wisdom they contained.

In my second or third term at Hili Homf I finally acquired my own record player, a diminutive Philips portable—so small, in fact, that an LP record placed on its turntable would protrude several inches over the edges of the cabinet. Despite its minuteness, I was delighted with it. I quickly became very fond of the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra recordings of Bach’s *Brandenburg Concertos*, and Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* and *The Firebird* in the Pierre Monteux recording. I played these over and over again in dormitory and common room, driving to distraction the other boys, who, apart from Geoff Howard, were not taken with classical music. These compositions are all seamlessly linked with those days in my mind. But it was the sheer excitement and swirling colours of *Petrushka*—an intensely visual piece of music—that truly sent me into ecstasies. A number of years were to pass before I saw the actual ballet (not a medium that has a particular appeal for me), but the experience was overwhelming.

My place at Millfield having been obtained on the basis of my supposed intellectual precocity, it was only natural that the Boss would want to determine whether his gamble in backing me would pay off. So not long after my arrival at Millfield I once again found myself the subject of psychological testing, this time at the hands of one F. S. Livie-Noble, the consulting psychologist engaged by the school to administer IQ tests to the pupils. A short, bald, bespectacled, somewhat fussy man, in appearance a near-caricature of a psychologist, Mr. Livie-Noble held court in a small pink hut specially reserved for him in the school grounds. I endured many sessions with him during my first term at Millfield. Under his watchful eye I ploughed through every conceivable sort of psychological test: IQ, academic attainment, Rorschach, you name it. I began to feel that the whole future course of my life somehow depended on this man’s judgment of my abilities. I recall that on one occasion he dropped his formal manner and asked me in an amicable way what I was currently reading. “Some books by Einstein and Freud,” I replied. On hearing this last name he stiffened. “Which book by Freud?” he asked. “*The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*,” I returned. (I had recently acquired a paperback copy of the book from somewhere and found it engrossing.) “Throw it away,” he commanded, “you’re too young to understand it.” So apparently I was old enough for Einstein but too young for Freud! On another occasion, after I had just completed a Rorschach test, he got up and went outside briefly, leaving his notes open on the table. Consumed with curiosity, I got hold of these and rapidly scanned them. His handwriting being crabbed to the point of indecipherability, all I managed to glean from this document was his finding “distinctly odd” my associating devil’s horns with some inkblot

pattern. When the inquisition finally drew to a close, he shook me by the hand and told me that I would be “near the top” of any profession I chose to take up. While hearing this came as a relief, I still wondered what he *really* meant by the remark. Sometime later I learned that he had sent a report to my parents in which he stated that, in his opinion, I was “working beyond my ability”, a phrase which came to haunt me. The few readers of my narrative will, I fear, find little in his judgment from which to dissent.

Nevertheless, the outcome was my being placed in the school’s top stream. The system of streaming pupils in place at Millfield in those days was of a Byzantine complexity. There were four basic streams: *A*, *B*, *C* and *P*. (The *P* here stood for “practical”, but it was a school joke that it should be changed to *T* for “thick”. I recall my father’s amusement at the very notion of a *P* stream.) Within these main groupings were further gradations corresponding to the pupil’s form level and area of specialization. Thus, for example, I was assigned to class 4A Arts for my arts subjects, and 2S for science subjects. (For some reason “2” was used to designate the sixth, or top form.) Classes were small, never exceeding six or eight in number; in my final year at Millfield most of my classes consisted of myself and one other boy, P. D. Norton, of whom more presently. The standard of instruction was very high, and the teachers themselves—those who taught me, at any rate—almost all patient and supportive. I recall with gratitude their kindness and tolerance during that first difficult year.

But the classification of the pupils at Millfield in terms of innate ability—very much a reflection of British educational policy of the day—came to remind me uncomfortably of the society depicted in *Brave New World*, with its rigid linear ordering of alphas, betas and gammas. It is one thing to enjoy Huxley’s novel, quite another to be a member of a society resembling, however faintly, the one he delineates with such brilliance! I had been lucky enough to make the alpha class in my own society (or so I believed) and I would have been stung with humiliation had it been otherwise. This of course contradicted my inward feeling that in essence I was the same as everybody else, and also provoked the troubling thought that those who had been assigned to the inferior classes must be suffering from the very feelings of humiliation I had, for the nonce, been spared. (And in any case I was not wholly spared such feelings since I suspected that Livie-Noble had assessed me as an alpha-minus!) While I recognized that people differed in native ability, at the same time I was repelled by the idea of imposing an inescapably linear scale of inherent superiority and inferiority.

But my egalitarian notions, such as they were, remained to be articulated. In the meantime I immersed myself in my studies. Virtually on arrival at the school I had been entered for the O-level mathematics exam, which I sat in December 1958, just before flying off to rejoin my

PERPETUAL MOTION

family in Tripoli for the winter vacation. I was relieved to learn on my return in January that I had passed. In July 1959 I took my first A-level (in Pure and Applied Mathematics) and O-levels in Latin, English, History, Physics and Chemistry. I managed to pass all these as well, but I barely scraped through the History paper. While I had enjoyed Roman history as a child, nineteenth century British history, with its dreary succession of corn laws and taxation bills, I found excruciatingly boring. To this day the idea of the nineteenth century evokes in me not the heroic romanticism of its early decades, but the sterile respectabilities of the Victorian era. But in fact my history teacher, Miss Emma Maud Sawtell, had a cultivated mind and was, in fact, a considerable scholar in her own right, as I learned when I took a course in general civilization with her in my last term at Millfield. I shall always remain grateful to her for introducing me to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which I read in the Penguin translation by Rosemary Edmonds, and which instilled in me a lifelong fascination with Russian literature. Although I cannot recall any of Miss Sawtell's actual utterances, in my mind's eye I can still see her striding stiffly into class, her face reddened by the cold of a winter morning. Dressed in an enveloping skirt of dense brown wool, grey jumper and sensible shoes, she appears every inch the archetypal English schoolmistress. Sitting down at her desk, she summons the class to attention with an awkward gesture. She essays a witticism, correctly anticipating the class's lack of response by appending a chortle of her own... .

In my first year at Millfield I was taught English by Mr. John, an ebullient Welshman of boundless pedagogic enthusiasm. He took the class through Shakespeare's *Henry V*, vigorously declaiming the lines—especially, of course, Harry's rousing appeal to his troops:

*Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;
Or close the wall up with our English dead!
In peace there's nothing more becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility:
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger;
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage...
.....The game's afoot:
Follow your spirit: and upon this charge
Cry—God for Harry! England! And Saint George!*

And he conveyed genuine emotion in reading the report of Falstaff's last hours:

*...for after I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers,
and smile upon his fingers' ends, I knew there was but one way; for
his nose was as sharp as a pen, and a' babbled of green fields.*

As a Welshman Mr. John naturally also enjoyed using his native accent in the part of Fluellen, with its *look you's*, and other "Welshisms". I can still recall both the accent and the indignation he brought to Fluellen's line:

*Kill the poys and the luggage! 'tis expressly against the law of arms:
'tis as arrant a piece of knavery, mark you now, as can be offered; in
your conscience now, is it not?*

Mr. John also introduced the class to the poetry of Coleridge, which led me to an abiding interest in the man and his works. I recall the rhythm of Mr. John's reading of *Kublai Khan*:

*In Xanadu did Kublai Khan
A stately pleasure dome decree
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round.
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree.
And here were forests ancient as the hills
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery. ...
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean*

I found this altogether irresistible. I was also to be affected deeply by Coleridge's *Frost at Midnight*, which concludes with these lines of surpassing beauty:

*Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while the night thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eve-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost*

PERPETUAL MOTION

*Shall hang them up in silent icicles
Quietly shining to the quiet moon.*

Truly sublime. A decade or so later when living near Highgate, where Coleridge spent the last years of his life, I would make the occasional pilgrimage to the church (St. Michael's) in whose grounds Coleridge is interred. On a stone mounted in the church's floor is inscribed Coleridge's moving epitaph, with its oblique reference to his opium addiction:

*Stop, Christian Passer-by! Stop, Child of God!
And read with a gentle heart. Beneath this sod
There lies a Poet: or what once was He,
O lift thy soul in prayer for S.T.C.
That He who many a year with toil of breath
Found death in life, may here find life in death.
Mercy for praise, to be forgiven for fame
He ask'd, and hoped thro' Christ. Do thou the same.*

I seem to recall winning some sort of prize in Mr. John's class for a short story in which I described a trip to the moon from the point of view of the spacecraft. At the time I wrote it, astronomers thought it likely that the moon's surface was covered by a deep layer of fine dust produced by the impact of meteorites over billions of years (of course we now know this to be false). So I ended the story tragically with the spaceship and its crew engulfed by the dust.

It was in Mr. John's class that the differences between British and American *spelling* first began to impinge on me, since at first my compositions would be returned with a number of red marks indicating numerous misspellings, something of which I had rarely before been guilty. For example, while I was aware that the British insist on inserting a *u* in the words *color*, *rigor*, etc., I came to learn that the British also spell the American *traveler* as *traveller* (and, strangely, the American *skillful* as *skilful* and *enroll* as *enrol*⁹); *check* as *cheque*; *plow* as *plough*; *gray* as *grey*; *mustache* as *moustache* (and, moreover, pronounce it "mustosh"); *judgment* as *judgement*; *program* as *programme*; *skeptical* as *sceptical*; *tire* as *tyre*; *center* as *centre* (etc.); *whiskey* as *whisky*; *analyze* as *analyse* (etc.); *encyclopedia* as *encyclopaedia* (etc.); *maneuver* as *manoeuvre*, *curb* as *kerb*. I also learned the (to me) novel British substitution of the word *should* for *would* as in *I should have thought...*, or the epistolary *I should be*

⁹ Many years later I came to regard this spelling as fortunate since the American spelling would block the palindrome *Lorne and Edna enrol*.

grateful if you would be so kind as to..., in which an obligation is no longer implied.

I also remember with affection Mr. Slayton, my first-year physics teacher, a sandy-haired man with a moustache masking a harelip that caused him to speak with a lisp. This impediment, together with a certain awkwardness of manner made him a figure of fun in the eyes of some of his pupils, a fact of which he was fully aware. But he took a shine to me when I told him of my attempts to read Einstein's *Relativity*. (This gained me the reputation of a teacher's pet, leading to the taunt "Johnny's learning unclear (nuclear) physics.") After class one day he told me that he had been a student of the physicist E. A. Milne at Oxford. I had never heard of Milne (and had then only the haziest notion of Oxford) but Mr. Slayton explained to me that Milne had developed a theory called kinematical relativity which was an alternative to Einstein's general relativity. This intrigued me, because while I felt that I had some grasp of special relativity, the general theory remained tantalizingly beyond my intellectual reach at that time. (Mr. Slayton actually lent me some books by Milne, but I cannot now recall what, if anything, I made of them.) I had the impression that Mr. Slayton found the teaching of elementary physics frustrating, and the nostalgic eagerness with which he recalled his Oxford days seemed to confirm this.

In my latter years at Millfield I was taught physics by Mr. Slow, the senior science teacher. He was a large, kindly man, with a deliberateness of manner that irresistibly attracted his pupils' catchphrase (which he had doubtless anticipated) "Slow by name, slow by nature". Under his benign tutelage I worked my way through the school physics textbooks of the day—Nelkon's *Heat*, Ditchburn's *Light*, Quadling and Ramsey's *Mechanics*, etc. I recall with some chagrin an incident that took place in his class. For some reason he left the room suddenly, forgetting in the rush of departure that he had left his attaché case open on his desk. Eager to extract any information that the case might contain, my classmates and I rifled shamelessly through its contents. There we found dossiers on all the senior science pupils. Each dossier contained a report on the student's progress and the results of his psychological testing, including his IQ score. It seems absurd now, but I can still recall my dismay at seeing that, according to Livie-Noble's tests, some of these IQ scores exceeded my own!

I received instruction in chemistry from Mr. Bromfield. Known to all as "Brom", he was a flamboyant red-haired man sporting an RAF-issue handlebar moustache. He brought to his teaching a panache which made classes with him great fun. His chemical demonstrations were accompanied by a gaudy patter which ran something like the following: "First one triturates the jolly old crystals in ye olde mortar and pestle, then one bungs them into yon beaker, adds a spot—a

PERPETUAL MOTION

souçon, as the dear old French would say—of this liquid of roseate hue, stirs gently, stands back, and awaits developments.” What appeal chemistry had for me lay in these developments, which, under optimum conditions, took the form of arresting bangs and stinks. O-level chemistry practicals were in fact far more interesting than their counterparts in physics. These consisted chiefly of stultifying experiments involving antique Wheatstone bridges and rudimentary thermal expansion devices. But in respect of theory I saw the relationship as the exact reverse: physics was theoretically deep, while as far as I could see chemistry had no theory to speak of. Still, I enjoyed heating test tubes to near incandescence over Bunsen burners, plunging lit spills into merrily bubbling flasks, and watching strips of litmus paper change colour as they were removed, dripping, from nameless fluids, which latter could then be induced, by suitable stimulation, to deposit flocculent precipitates. The acme of my experience as a juvenile chemist was to be attained when one afternoon I and my fellow delinquents dumped a number of large copper penny coins into beakers of nitric acid, causing the emission of clouds of brown nitric oxide of such copiousness as to necessitate the evacuation of the entire lab. When I went on to the more advanced organic chemistry with Mr. Taylor, the highly competent, but comparatively staid, senior chemistry teacher, the fun faded out of the subject for me. Organic chemistry had little of the entertainment value of its more robust inorganic cousin. Organic compounds all seemed to take the form of identical colourless liquids with jawbreaking names like monothioethylene glycol or methylcyclohexylcarbinol. The whole business seemed to me largely a mnemonic exercise. Still, I stayed with the subject to “S-” (scholarship) level (to my surprise obtaining a distinction in the examination, better than I achieved in my “official” subjects of mathematics and physics) and so would have been qualified to study chemistry at university if I had so wished (but perish the thought!).

Latin was taught by Mr. Edghill, an affable old gent with a curiously strangulated way of speaking. He called my classmate Nigel Lawrence “Lawgh-runce”, sounding for all the world as if he was clearing his throat. Under his instruction we droned our way through Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* and the first book of the *Aeneid*, neither of which I found particularly stimulating as literature. As a result my earlier enthusiasm for Latin waned, and I was happy to be relieved of further formal study of the subject after I passed the ‘O’-level exam at the end of my first year.

I had three instructors in mathematics at Millfield in successive years: Captain Clarkson, Mr. Nest, and Mr. Kerry. I have already mentioned Captain Clarkson. Known to all as “Hector”, Mr. Nest was a competent but irascible man, whose normal mode of chastising pupils

for classroom transgressions was the (even then) old-fashioned setting of “lines”. On one occasion Nigel Lawrence neglected to bring his textbook to class, an apparently unpardonable omission that Hector took as a personal affront. He worked himself up into a terrible lather, fulminating on about responsibility and respect for one’s elders. Finally he calmed down sufficiently to assign the unfortunate Nigel the tedious task of writing out 100 times the sentence (as near as I can recall) *I must never forget to bring my books with me to my tutor’s room*. Hector taught projective geometry, a branch of mathematics I came to dislike. This may have been in part because I associated the subject with the somewhat unpleasant atmosphere in Hector’s classroom, but there were surely intrinsic reasons as well. While I had always enjoyed Euclidean geometry, with its rigorous demonstrations, I lacked the visual imagination required for the appreciation of the subtler beauties of projective geometry. Also I had become so attached to the formal manipulations of algebra and the calculus that I was put off by what I saw as the qualitative form of argument in projective geometry. For what it is worth, I am by nature an algebraist rather than a geometer.

Mr. Kerry was an aged and affable gentleman who had read mathematics at Oxford in his youth. When pointing out a mistake in a pupil’s work, he would never miss an opportunity to employ his favourite phrase: “You’ve fudged it!”. This inevitably led to his being nicknamed “Fudge”. Old Fudge taught algebra and the calculus from old-fashioned textbooks such as Dakin and Porter’s *Further Elementary Analysis* and Durrell’s *Algebra*. But I enjoyed working my way through the problems in these books, and Fudge applauded my efforts. If, as I have come to believe, pleasure is the avoidance of pain, I’m doubly gratified when I recall that in one of his reports Fudge wrote of me: “he has the makings of a genuine mathematician”.

In my last year (1961) at Millfield I took up the study of Russian with Mr. Sergeant, a remarkable linguist—it was rumoured that he had mastered more than 30 languages. The rapid development of science in the Soviet Union since the end of World War II had convinced Western observers that the Russian language was likely to become as important a vehicle of scientific communication as German had been previously, and so potential scientists were encouraged to develop a familiarity with technical Russian. Scholar that he was, Mr. Sergeant chose to use for the purposes of instruction not an up-to-date manual of techno-Russian, but instead Anna H. Semeonova’s old-fashioned text, which, with its many pre-revolutionary references, was aimed chiefly at aspiring students of Russian literature. In Semeonova one never came across the word *tovarich*—let alone *sputnik*: instead, one could not avoid bumping into *gospoda*—gentlemen—alighting from *ekipazhi*—carriages. (Semeonova’s book is long gone, but I still cherish the elegant little pair of Russian-English dictionaries bought for 25/- at the school

book-room.) Although I, a poor linguist, never became proficient in Russian, I came to admire the language greatly, both for its intrinsic beauty, and for the richness of its literature (I hardly ever used it for technical purposes.) Strangely, although I developed a rudimentary reading knowledge of Russian, I never learned the Cyrillic alphabet in sequence—unlike Greek, a language I had never studied, but the letters of whose alphabet, used as mathematical symbols, I had learned to recite in correct order. I was fascinated by Russian proverbs such as *svolkami zhits, pa-volchi vuitch* (“If you live with wolves, you must howl like one”)—a typically hard-boiled Russian version of “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Later it amused me to invent what I called “Rusoid” proverbs such as “Only a fool would plant potatoes on the right bank of the Volga and expect them to sprout on the left” and—as a surrogate for “All roads lead to Rome”—“All roads lead to salt mine.” Many words in Russian are highly polysyllabic. For example, I was surprised to learn that the original Russian word for the imperative “stop!” is the monstrous *ostanavlivayatyess*. I also learned that the Russians had sensibly absorbed the word “stop” into their vocabulary, but only, as I was later to joke, after Stalin, catching his foot in the door of his official car, was dragged along for a block before he could say *ostanavlivayatyess*! I recall that I read in class an abridged and grossly oversimplified version of Lermontov’s *Geroi Nashevo Vremenyi*—A Hero of Our Time. It was only much later when I read a full translation of this work that I came to appreciate its subtle ironies. In the version I read at school, which was admittedly commensurate with my limited knowledge of Russian, these ironies were entirely missing—at least, I couldn’t detect them. The hero Pechorin was reduced from a dashing Byronic figure to a cardboard dummy mechanically repeating the phrase *Ya ofitser* (“I am an officer”). Still, better a simplified version of a classic in the original language, I suppose, than none at all.

The music teacher at Millfield in my day was the jovial “Freddie” Fox, who led the school choir, in which I sang as a treble until my voice broke to tenor. When I told him of my abortive efforts at learning to play the violin, he urged that I take it up again, lending me a serviceable fiddle on which to get started. I scraped sporadically on this instrument throughout my time at Millfield, but, much as I loved the violin and its music, the fact that I had no gift for playing it remained inescapable. With typical generosity Freddie let me keep the violin he had lent me. Some years later, when I had finally abandoned my struggles with the instrument, I gave it to Michèle Aquarone’s younger sister, Marie-Christine, who had it reconditioned and found it to be of respectable nineteenth-century French provenance.

With his firm belief in the principle of *mens sana in corpore sano*, the Boss attached great importance to sporting activities. All boys were required to engage in school games—rugby or “rigger” in the autumn

term, (field) hockey in the winter, and cricket in the summer. Having played basketball in American high school, I was allowed to substitute this for cricket, a dispensation for which I had good reason to be grateful, since cricket seemed to me the silliest game ever devised. Fool I may have been, but I simply could not see myself as a flanneled fool at the wicket. Nevertheless, despite its longueurs, cricket had a certain visual appeal, like watching a painting dry. This could not be said for rugger or hockey, activities in which I could discern no redeeming features whatsoever, but into which I could not avoid being dragooned. Rugger was a matter of sliding about in a sea of mud in pursuit of a slippery leather spheroid, sensible players (if any) trying to avoid being brought down not merely by members of the opposing team, but also, through inadvertent collision, by those of their own. Fortunately I was too small to be impressed into the unspeakable scrum in which the bulkier members of each team, sweatily gripping one another's shoulders, would collectively wrestle, grunting and groaning, for possession of the ball. On the occasions—mercifully few—the infernal thing came my way, my first impulse was to fling it away as quickly as possible before attracting unwelcome attention. Hockey was, if anything, worse, since the ordeal was conducted in the depths of winter when one's whole body was numbed with cold. Here players ran the risk of having an eye poked out by one of the curious curved sticks with which the ball was whacked around the field. This object, hard as rock, was a hazard in itself, since, instead of being directed towards the goal, it was, on occasion, maliciously targeted at fellow players. I can recall being on the receiving end of such malice on several occasions, with painful results.

Basketball, on the other hand, I enjoyed. At that time the school lacked an indoor gymnasium, so games were played outside on a converted tennis court, but only during the pleasant months of late spring and summer. As I grew in stature¹⁰ I became a more effective player, until finally I found myself—to my surprise—on the school team, whose members were, like me, mainly expatriates—Americans, Iranians, Egyptians, Trinidadians. Basketball was not played with any degree of seriousness in Britain at that time, so inclusion in the school team was hardly a great accomplishment. Nevertheless I took considerable pride in this scintilla of sporting achievement. We competed with the teams of the few other schools that had organized basketball tournaments. For away matches we piled into a hired coach and took off for the day, relieving the monotony of the journey by singing songs such as *When the Saints Come Marching In* and *You Can't Go to Heaven*, in which each of us supplied a line, for example:

¹⁰ My passports attest that when I arrived at Millfield in 1958 I was a minute 5' 2", and that when I left at the end of 1961 I had grown to a respectable 6' 0".

PERPETUAL MOTION

*You can't go to heaven in a Ford coupé
'cos the Lord's got shares in Chevrolet!*

My one moment of glory on the basketball court occurred during a home match and was the result, in truth, of frustration. Prevented by members of the opposing team from getting closer than ten yards or so to their basket, in desperation I flung the ball in its general direction. Having not the slightest expectation of the shot's being successful, I immediately turned away without following the ball's trajectory. A few seconds later I was surprised to hear the spectators clapping and cheering, for the ball had, as if guided by an unseen hand, passed straight into the basket. I fancy that the feat must have seemed doubly impressive because of my apparent nonchalance in turning away, as if a successful outcome was a *fait accompli*. This marvellous fluke was, however, offset by a painful incident in a later match. During a struggle under the basket, I turned around suddenly, bringing my nose into violent collision with the elbow of one of the members of the opposing team. My recently acquired spectacles were split in two, and blood spurted everywhere. I was helped to the school infirmary, where Miss Warner cleaned me up and left me to rest. The balloon-like proportions my nose had assumed made her suspect that it had been broken, and this turned out to be the case. I carry a bump on the bridge of my nose to this day.

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I come now to the circumstances which led to my sole caning while at Millfield, an experience without which no public school education is complete, and which I feel impresses the stamp of authenticity on my narrative. One afternoon an announcement was made that a number of overhead pipes in the changing-rooms had been damaged, presumably by some idiot swinging on them. It was further announced that if the culprit or culprits failed to come forward, the whole school would be sent on a punishment run. (This tactic, designed to put pressure on the guilty parties, was also employed in prisoner-of-war camps, which public schools in many respects resembled. It has often been remarked that the rigours of a British public school education provide ideal training for future POWs.) Needless to say, the ploy failed to work and so the following day I found myself on the cross-country course plodding, along with my fellow-unfortunates, through the drizzle. I dragged my way through boggy fields and scrambled over fences for what seemed hours, until finally emerging, weary and mud-bespattered, on the road leading back to the school and, so I hoped, to the end of the silly ordeal. But to my dismay I found a number of

prefects on bicycles patrolling the road, bellowing “run!” as usual. I was singled out for special treatment by one of these fledgling fascists, who yelled at me to “get the lead out of my feet,” or words to that effect. Goaded beyond endurance, doubly emboldened by the fact that my tormentor appeared no less weedy than myself, I shouted back at him to piss off. He did not reply, and I put the incident out of my mind. The next morning I received an ominous summons to present myself that afternoon at the prefects’ common room in Millfield House. Clearly this could mean just one thing—a disciplinary caning for my act of insubordination the previous day. Having little choice in the matter, I showed up at the specified time and joined the disconsolate, shuffling group of fellow-transgressors gathered in the corridor awaiting punishment. After a while I was admitted to the inner sanctum, to find a kangaroo court of senior prefects—including the weedy fellow I had offended—all puffing away at their pipes. The “chief prosecutor”, a prefect with the same surname as mine, read the charges, namely, that on the previous day’s run I had made an offensive remark to a prefect. Did the accused have anything to say before sentence was passed? I must have done, only I cannot remember my words—probably something to the effect that it was unfair that we plebs should have to run while the prefects toiled around on bicycles. Whatever the words, they fell on deaf ears, because I was sentenced to four of the best, which were administered then and there. Having to bend over and allow a cane to be applied to my posterior I recall as a humiliating, but not especially painful experience.

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In the early summer of 1959 my father’s job with H.T. Smith took him and the family to Quito, Ecuador. After sitting my exams at the end of the summer term I flew out to join them. I made an overnight stop in New York where I met Ed and Elinor Bohle, a warm, cultivated couple whom my parents had got to know during their New York days. Elinor designed fashion shoes, while Ed, an industrial chemist by occupation, used his spare time to write detective novels, some of which had been published under a pseudonym. The sole further memory of my visit to New York is of turning on the TV set in my hotel bedroom to see on the news that Fidel Castro had just arrived in New York to begin his first, and, as it turned out, last, U.S. tour.

The flight to Quito from New York by Panagra Airlines seemed interminable, due in large part to the fact that the pilot yielded to the temptation to land at every intervening airport equipped with a runway of sufficient length. After touching down in Miami, we made stops in Caracas, Bogota and Cali, and probably other places I cannot now recall, before arriving at our final destination.

PERPETUAL MOTION

Quito, the Ecuadorian capital, is tucked away in a narrow Andean valley on the slope of an extinct volcano a few miles south of the equator. The famous Andean peaks of Chimborazo and Cotopaxi lie less than 100 miles south of Quito. When one has seen them one can well understand Walter Turner's feelings when he wrote the lines

Chimborazo, Cotopaxi / They had stolen my soul away!

At an elevation of 9300 feet, Quito's atmosphere is rather thin, but this is more than compensated for by the mildness of its climate, the mean temperature at noon being just 70°. The impression I retain of Quito is of an isolated, tranquil city of great charm, and I regret not having had the opportunity to return there.

Once again, my father had come in pursuit of water, a liquid whose scarcity in the Libyan desert had been a continual source of frustration. But surely, I can imagine him thinking, the high mountains surrounding Quito, with their snow-capped peaks and hidden valleys, would present a different proposition altogether. To furnish Quito—whose population at that time cannot have exceeded 300,000—with a reliably adequate water supply it would only be necessary to locate a valley with sufficient run-off from the surrounding mountains to form a natural reservoir, then pipe the water down to the capital, and Bob's your uncle! While this was a most elegant solution in principle, at least, its realization proved, yet again, to be maddeningly elusive. I recall on one occasion taking a trip with my father and a couple of his colleagues into the mountains by Land-Rover to check out a promising report of a pretty mountain valley, which according to reports was "filled with sparkling water". After driving for several hours along mountain tracks, ascending several thousand feet through scenery of compelling beauty, we finally debouched in the promised valley. It was as pretty as promised, and indeed filled with water that coruscated as far as the eye could see. At last! But on wading into it my father and his colleagues found that its depth did not exceed a few feet, making it a serious contender for inclusion in the Guinness Book of Records as the world's largest puddle, but rendering it virtually useless as a reservoir. I never learned whether my father found his "celestial reservoir", but I would like to think that, in the end, he did.

Part of my summer in Quito was spent roaming around and making mild mischief with a recently befriended American kid of my age, John Ehrenhardt. I recall that one afternoon we came across a construction site on the side of a hill where a number of large cylindrical concrete pipes had been piled awaiting installation in a trench which had been dug below. Seized with the idea of launching a few of these pipes into the trench where they would burst like bombs, we returned after the workers had downed tools for the day and did

just that, to our immense satisfaction. It is fortunate that nobody caught us in this youthful act of vandalism, for we would probably have landed in jail or found ourselves on the next plane out of the country.

Other memories of Quito include eating delicious barbecued chicken at a picnic ground harbouring a flock of grazing llamas, as well as an ice cream parlour whose paper napkins were printed with a map of Ecuador on which the disputed eastern border with Peru was indicated by a number of soldiers firing at one another. This conflict, it seemed, had been waged fitfully since the 1940s when Peru had gobbled up a large portion of Ecuador. The contested border passed through dense rainforest in which tribes of headhunters roamed (also shown on the map) and so had remained unsurveyed: a soldier sent into this region was, apparently, as likely to wind up with a shrunken head as to fall to an enemy bullet. I also recall seeing one day a band of soldiers herding a number of men at gunpoint through the streets of Quito—I learned that in Ecuador voting for one of the political parties (“blanco” or “colorado”) was compulsory, and that these men were reluctant voters being marched to the polling station.

The population of Ecuador is chiefly Amerindian, short, sturdy, dark-featured people with jet black eyes and straight black hair. I was struck by the amazing chest expansion—the result, I surmised, of growing up in a rarefied atmosphere—of the people I saw in the streets of Quito. At 6’ 4” my father towered over most Ecuadorians, and children in particular regarded him as some kind of Goliath. I recall on one occasion walking with my father down the street and encountering a group of small children playing a game on the sidewalk. They took one look at him, and ran off in all directions, shouting *Gigante, gigante!*

In those days three “grades” of bus plied Quito’s streets. For the modest price of one *sucre* you could step aboard a diminutive, but comfortable buslet allowing no standing passengers, and which would carry you to your destination in comparative style. These conveyances were used chiefly by the better-off. For a more modest fare you could ride on a regular bus, with regular seats, but with standing passengers admitted. If you were really hard-up you could risk boarding one of the seatless flea-buses which, packed like sardine cans, careered through the streets at breakneck speed, belching clouds of acrid black smoke. Each of these curious vehicles had apparently been assembled by starting with a flimsy metal shell, punching a number of glassless holes in it to let in the light, and then bolting the result to a American truck chassis. Considering the extreme inertial forces to which these contraptions were subjected by their demented drivers, it seems little short of remarkable that they didn’t simply fall apart.

My most vivid memory of our sojourn in Ecuador is of the ill-fated trip we made to Guayaquil on the country’s Pacific coast. My parents had originally hoped to get to the Galapagos Islands—famous for giant

turtles and other exotic fauna—situated in the Pacific several hundred miles west. But for some reason this idea was abandoned and the decision taken to drive the mere couple of hundred miles to Guayaquil and spend a few days' vacation there. To this end my father got us a booking at a Guayaquil hotel, the *Flamingo*. Early one morning we piled into the company car, a black Oldsmobile, and took off, our spirits high. The road to the coast wound its way in its long descent past spectacular gorges and along the edges of precipices carved out from the sheer rock face. We had the hair-raising experience of following one of the buses whose route took it along this road. Bulging with passengers, the ramshackle vehicle tore along at lunatic speed, as if out of a cartoon, miraculously avoiding a collision with oncoming traffic each time it swerved, seemingly out of control, around one of the road's almost unbroken succession of hairpin bends. Typically, I began to worry whether the brakes on the heavy Olds would hold up—on this occasion the rest of the family shared my anxieties. It was with a feeling of relief that we finally reached the lowlands. The road, now reduced to little more than a mud track, meandered through the steamy rainforest, from which could be heard the cries of birds and other animals harder to identify. We passed through the occasional torpid village, its inhabitants staring at us with curiosity as we drove slowly along, careful to avoid flattening any of the numerous chickens strutting around or the bored dogs spreadeagled in the road. One of these hamlets differed from the rest in appearing to be a hive of activity populated entirely by Chinese—certainly all the signs we could see were written in that language. It is still a matter of wonderment to me that a Chinese settlement could spring up in the depths of the Ecuadorian jungle.

We reached Guayaquil late that afternoon, and proceeded to search for our promised hotel, the Flamingo. We had envisaged this establishment as an elegant resort equipped with a swimming pool, air conditioning, and all the amenities of civilized living. As we drove through the town centre, we came across a number of hotels fitting our imagined description, but none of them, to our disappointment, bore the name "Flamingo". My father stopped the car and asked a passer-by where the Flamingo might be. Learning that it was on the other side of town, we headed in that direction. Our apprehension grew as we passed in the gathering darkness through neighbourhoods of increasing squalour. Eventually we spotted a fitfully flashing neon sign, with several of its letters missing, from which we could just spell out the name "Hotel Flamingo". The place itself, when we finally pulled up in front of it, resembled in no respect the pleasure dome we had fondly imagined on our departure. It was, in fact, an eyesore so dilapidated as to appear to risk collapse under the pressure of a light breeze. Inside, illumination was provided by the occasional naked light bulb dangling

from a cord frayed to the point of short-circuitry. As air conditioning the establishment boasted a number of rickety ceiling fans whose rate of rotation likely had to be kept sufficiently low to prevent them crashing to the floor in flames. And as for the swimming pool, there wasn't any. It being too late to seek alternative accommodation, we bowed with reluctance to our fate. What with the mosquitoes, the tropical heat, and the sounds of drunken revelry funnelling through the unshuttable transoms over the doors of the rooms, none of us was likely to forget the night we spent at the glamorous Hotel Flamingo. To this day the word "Flamingo" evokes in my mind a sleepless night in a sleazy hotel.

We set out again early the following morning, eager to distance ourselves from the Hotel Flamingo as quickly as possible. We drove northwards up the coast hoping to find somewhere acceptable to stay. Eventually we came across a spanking new establishment perched right on the ocean's edge. Delighted with our discovery, we checked in and found the place comfortable and well-equipped, in every respect the opposite of the Flamingo. The sole oddity was the fact that its management, and, so far as one could tell, its residents (apart from ourselves) consisted exclusively of Germans. My mother soon became convinced that we had fetched up in a nest of Nazis, and insisted on our leaving immediately. I cannot recall why she came to believe this—perhaps she had spotted a platoon of guests goosestepping along the corridors at night—but we got out of there in a hurry. And even then our tribulations were not over. On the drive back to Quito we pulled in at a greasy spoon where we ate a couple of hamburgers. A few hours later Lynette and I were taken violently ill with food poisoning, so that my father had to stop the car and allow us to regurgitate the remains of these "ptomaineburgers", as they came to be known. Fortunately we soon recovered.

My family spent nearly a year in Ecuador, returning to California in the spring of 1960. I spent less than two months there, but the experience lives on as a colourful and exotic memory.

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I returned to Millfield in September 1959 to find that I had been transferred to the oddly named Joan's Kitchen, a House in Street run by Sid Hill, a teacher of biology at the school, and his wife Yolande. Joan's Kitchen was a far cry from Hill Home, since it housed more than twenty "boys", several of whom were actually young men of seventeen or eighteen in their final year at the school. Sid and Yolande, both Welsh, were easy-going and uninclined to run a tight ship, so the atmosphere in the place was relaxed and informal. A good deal of

badinage seemed to be exchanged between the attractive Yolande and some of the older boys, but Sid didn't seem to mind.

I was assigned to a barracks-like dormitory which housed ten or so boys. The dorm prefect, Roger Myddelton, was somewhat older than the rest of us and left the school at the end of the year to read medicine at Cambridge, where I later got to know him better. The other members of the dorm included the tennis-players Peter Breed and Bob (?) Manser, the lofty Mike Steele—whose nickname, "Sixes" derived from the fact that he appeared already to have attained the height of 6' 6"—and Chris Yates, a golf specialist. Roger Myddelton—who had inevitably attracted the nickname "Twiddleton"—found keeping order in the dormitory a trying experience. After lights out, to his suggestion "Let's get some sleep," some bright spark invariably rejoined "Where from?" and the chattering would continue undiminished. Other denizens of Joan's Kitchen included Winfield Scott, from Trinidad, the Head of House, and Johnny Bassili, an amiable Egyptian with whom I struck up a friendship. On his departure from the school at the end of the year, he bequeathed me his reading lamp, which remained with me for a number of years. Each time I switched it on I was reminded of his generosity.

I rubbed along reasonably well with these fellows, apart from Chris Yates, who made it his duty right from our first meeting to give me as hard a time as possible. On a sealed door next to my bed I had mounted a shelf on which I had installed my precious record player. I had to be careful not to use it when Chris Yates was within earshot because as soon as he heard the strains of what he called "that classical rubbish" he would sneak behind the door and give it a hard knock, dislodging the player's pickup and causing it to slide right across the record. I solved this problem by having the record player fitted out with an earphone, so enabling me to listen to my beloved music mostly undisturbed.

Mike Steele, with whom I became firm friends, was, I recall, addicted to film music, and would play his records of movie scores such as *The Big Country* and *Oklahoma!* incessantly. Being less than captivated by this sort of music, its constant repetition ultimately led me to implore Mike that he invest in the recently released recording of *The Angry Silence*¹¹.

Adjoining Joan's Kitchen was an open courtyard containing a number of garages. One of these had been converted into a bicycle

¹¹ Many years later Mike Steele reminded me of this episode, pointing out that *The Angry Silence* does actually have a score, written by no less a figure than Malcolm Arnold, to whose English and Scottish Dances I had introduced Mike while at school (a fact I had forgotten). This jogged my memory further: I now recall that Malcolm Arnold and my mother had been fellow-students at the Royal College of Music, and had at one time apparently been engaged to be married.

shop, which was run by an amiable fellow called Arthur. Arthur was fixated on bicycles, and would talk of nothing else. This was a source of considerable amusement to the wags at Joan's Kitchen, who would imitate Arthur's strong local accent along lines something like this: "Arr, there be two types of Sturmey-Archers¹², young gentleman, one has your rocker pawls, and the other has your spring pawls. It wouldn't do to be mixin' up your pawls now, would it? Down 'ere in Zummerzset we know our pawls. Arr." But everyone liked Arthur, and he kept our bicycles in tip-top condition.

By this time I had made two special friends, Khosrog Kaivani and "P. D." Norton. Khosrog, an Iranian, whom I got to know through basketball practice, was my elder by a couple of years. He had a real enthusiasm for philosophy and would continually talk in his curious drawl of his heroes Frege, Wittgenstein, and Carnap, names I first learned from him. We also had long and heated discussions about Einstein and whether space could have more than three dimensions. I regret that I lost touch with him after he left the school.

It was P. D. Norton, however, with whom I had the closest relationship, since, as budding physicists of nearly the same age, we shared most of our classes and did much of our classwork together. P. D., who disliked his given names Patrick Damian and insisted on being known by his initials, was the son of a worker at Clark's shoe factory in Street and attended the school as a day-boy. His intellectual precocity had attracted the Boss's attention and, like me, he had been offered a full scholarship. Unlike me, however, he was also good at games and wound up on the first teams of several sports. When we first met he was several inches taller than I: it was a source of considerable satisfaction to me that I came to catch him up and eventually surpass him in height. In appearance we were a study in contrasts, I sandy-haired, light-skinned and blue-eyed; he black-haired and dark-complexioned, his eyes a shade of grey that I associate with intelligence to this day. Our backgrounds, too, were strikingly different, and my American manner occasionally rubbed him the wrong way. But our shared enthusiasm for science and friendly rivalry in the classroom bonded us together. In applied mathematics we raced to be first to solve the numerous problems, typically involving spheres rolling down perfectly rough inclined planes and projectiles struggling thorough resisting media under the influence of gravity. It became our custom to spur each other on by calling out "tick, next one!" whenever an exercise was completed.

One matter, however, on which we did not see eye-to-eye was the subject of religion. P.D. had been brought up a strict Roman Catholic

¹² Sturmey-Archer was the firm making the then popular "three-speed" hub gearshifts for British bicycles. These were largely displaced in the 1960s by the French *dérailleur* system.

PERPETUAL MOTION

and took great exception to my agnosticism. P.D. held it to be part of God's essence that his existence is necessarily revealed to human beings, and so, since (according to P.D.) God does in fact exist, it is impossible *not* to believe in him. Thus in asserting that I was an agnostic I was mistaken, not only as to the facts, but also as to my own beliefs! This assault on my subjectivity took my breath away, and at first I thought he must be joking. But I soon became convinced of his sincerity, and grasped that in his way he was trying to help me. As P.D. saw it, in holding to my delusions as to my own mental state concerning the existence of the Deity, I was not merely being perverse, but risked arousing His ire, a dread circumstance which he, P.D., wished to spare me. While I was moved by P.D.'s concern for my spiritual welfare, on religious questions we remained separated by an unbridgeable gulf. Happily our friendship survived these differences.

I had begun to notice that Millfield was a coeducational establishment, even if, as was later the case at Oxford, the boys outnumbered the girls ten to one. I never got to know any of the girls at the school well, but their names—Anna Duckett, Rosemary Reeve, Frances MacLennan, Heather Knapman, Petronella Clark—still evoke in my mind's eye the splashes of colour they brought to the monochrome of the school's virtually all-male society.

Since my parents lived so far away from England, it was not feasible for me to return home every vacation, and so I often had to rely on the hospitality of relatives and friends (with whom on occasion I lodged as a paying guest). Initially I stayed with a cousin of my mother's, Yvonne Moffat, and her husband John. They lived in a small house in Woodford Green, a quiet suburb in the north-east of London, which had for many years been represented in Parliament by Winston Churchill (a mammoth bronze statue of whom stands on the Green). Yvonne showed me much kindness and I became very fond of her. A slim, elegant, fine-featured woman with silvered hair, she was an odd mixture of the modern and the traditional. She had been a police driver during the war and still enjoyed tooling around in her sporty red MG convertible. Yet she was also a great believer in the proprieties. I recall, for example, her requiring that, when we went out, I take her arm and walk on the side of the pavement nearest the curb, "because," as she often asserted, "that's what a *gentleman* would do." She abhorred what she called "scruffiness", and accordingly took pains to ensure that my hair was properly combed, my tie appropriately knotted, and my shoes brushed to a respectably modest shine. She also attempted, without success, to effect an improvement in my table manners, something which my mother had also tried in vain to achieve. For Yvonne—who had the misfortune to be born without a sense of smell—what one actually ate was less important than the manner in which it was

eaten. Her olfactory lack also meant that she could not have gas in the house, so that the couple's cooking had to be done by electricity.

Yvonne's husband, John Moffat, was employed at Moreland's, the match manufacturers. I had the impression almost from the beginning that I irritated him in some way. I was later told by Yvonne that his dislike of me, which she essentially confirmed, was the result of "jealousy". According to her, John felt that I had been given unfair advantages that he had missed in his own youth—his father had been unable to afford to send him to university, let alone an expensive private school like Millfield—and this annoyed him. (He must surely have known that I was there on scholarship, but perhaps this merely compounded his irritation.) He must also have regarded me as an appalling wet in failing to maintain a stiff upper lip during my first year at Millfield. My loquacity also, not surprisingly, got on his nerves. To this very moment I recall his pique when I unthinkingly broke the two-minute radio silence on Remembrance Day. And he was understandably furious when, in stashing my suitcase in the MG, I succeeded in smashing its speedometer beyond hope of repair. Finally, the fact that he and his wife had no children of their own (it seems, sadly, that they could not) must have magnified his resentment, for he surely did not see in me the son he might have had. Nevertheless, John tried his best to be tolerant of someone he found it impossible to like, and I suppose he deserves gratitude for that.

I recall spending one pleasant Christmas with David Partridge's family in Reading. Mr. Partridge, an officer in the RAF, was, like his son, witty and highly intelligent. I recall that he had inscribed his Christmas present to David—a collection of Sherlock Holmes short stories—with the phrase *Eleemosynary, my dear David*. Neither of us having the foggiest idea of what "eleemosynary" might mean, or even how to pronounce the word, we asked David's father. His reply: "Charitable', my boy, 'charitable'."

I also spent parts of vacations with Geoff Howard's family, lodging at the school in Hampshire originally set up by Geoff's grandmother, and of which Geoff himself eventually became Headmaster. I recall the German master at the school playing a record of the Bruch G minor violin concerto to us, enthusing all the while. Mike Steele's parents, who lived in a pretty cottage near Stratford-upon-Avon, were also kind enough to put me up for a time. His mother, a grave, gentle woman with long black hair, had studied mathematics in her youth (at Oxford, I think). It was in Stratford that I bought Roman Totenberg's recording of Bach's violin concertos, another early purchase I came to play incessantly. I recall that the quizzical expression on Bach's face in the drawing on the sleeve of this record afforded Mike no end of mirth.

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PERPETUAL MOTION

I come now to the most painful episode of my life—the tragic death of my mother in June 1960. One afternoon I was summoned by Boss to his study. After inviting me to sit down, he informed me that he had just received some bad news—my mother had been involved in a “serious accident”. Hearing this was like being dealt a physical blow: I felt as if my whole world was collapsing around me. For I had instantly assumed the worst—that my dear mother was already dead and that the blow was being softened. I spent the next few hours in a daze. At some point the fact of her death was confirmed to me, but I cannot remember when or how. The following day I was horrified to find that the tragedy had been reported in the British newspapers. I could not grasp at first why this should be. But on forcing myself to read the reports light dawned, for not only were the circumstances of her death sufficiently bizarre to be newsworthy in themselves, but she had also been identified as being tenuously related—through one of her cousins—to the British aristocracy, always a source of fascination for the press. According to the reports—as best as I can recall, and only with a stab of pain—early in the morning a man reported to the police that he had found a woman’s body by the side of the road not far from the turnoff to the family house in Mill Valley. The woman was my poor mother; she had died sometime the previous night, her back broken from what proved to be a fall from a moving vehicle. Under questioning the man admitted that she had in fact been a passenger in his car. He had met her, he said, in a local bar the night before—my father confirmed that my mother had gone out by herself, probably to that very bar. When the bar closed the man offered her a lift home, which she accepted. According to him, she was “pretty drunk.” On the drive back, he accidentally missed the turnoff to Tennessee Avenue (on which, it will be recalled, our house was located) at which point, he claimed, she opened the door of the car and threatened to throw herself out. Before he could stop the car she had fallen out, whether accidentally or voluntarily, he could not be certain. Not knowing what to do, the man said that he had “wandered around” before finally making up his mind to go to the police. But by that time my mother was dead. Later the man was tried and spent a year in jail for manslaughter.

Despite the horror of the circumstances, the man’s story was plausible. My mother was unhappy, a heavy drinker, and given to dramatic gestures. One such—I recall vividly—occurred when my mother, Lynette, Pete and I were travelling by train to visit my mother’s father in Gloucestershire. Lynette and I had been squabbling ceaselessly. Finally my mother, her patience at an end, got up, opened the compartment door, and, turning to the two of us, said that, if we did not start behaving ourselves, she would have no recourse but to

throw herself off the train. This brought us to our senses, but by that time the other passengers had become sufficiently alarmed to intervene. To my mother's mortification, this resulted in our being accompanied for the remainder of our journey by a stern and disapproving matron from the Women's Voluntary Service. Fortunately, a later change of trains enabled us to give her the slip.

My mother was only 39 when she died: her prophecy that she would not attain the age of 40 had been tragically fulfilled. I am now considerably older than she was when her life was cut off, but I find it odd to compare my sixty-year-old self with her—almost as strange as actually to travel into the past by time machine and to meet her as the older man I have become. In that part of my memory devoted to her the two of us remain frozen precisely at the ages we were when she died. The time machine of memory seems to obey a kind of reality principle: in using it to travel into one's past one necessarily becomes younger oneself. Fortunately dreams are not subject to this constraint: I have occasionally dreamt of meeting my mother after having myself achieved adulthood. But dreams can never compensate, in my mind, for her loss, nor in particular for the abrupt termination of a relationship between mother and son which had hardly begun to unfold.

The few weeks following my mother's death are blurred in my mind. I had a number of 'A'-level exams to sit and it was decided that, if I was up to it, I should stay to take them rather than fly immediately back to California. Somehow I must have managed to pull myself together and to have struggled through somehow. As a result I did not return to California until after my mother's funeral had taken place. I believe she was cremated and her ashes scattered, as she had requested, over her father's estate at Northmoor.

I returned to the family home in Mill Valley to find all plunged in gloom. While Mum's death had been a devastating blow to all of us, it was, surely, especially shattering for my father, since he must have felt that he might have done more to prevent the tragedy. To some extent Pete, being only six, was shielded by his age. But Lynette, at twelve, must have taken the blow very hard. I realized how fortunate I was in not being present at the time the tragedy actually took place. And I grasped, however obscurely, that, with Mum's passing, I had to lead an independent life.

That last summer at 307 Tennessee Avenue was filled with sadness, and I recall little of it. Granddad O. had moved in to assist my father, but he found the atmosphere depressing as well, and rarely left his room. For me one bright note was the discovery of the Bay Area radio stations KDFC and KPFA, which provided musical escape. It was on one of these stations that I first heard the Bach D minor keyboard concerto, which impressed me so much that I rushed out to buy the record at the aptly named "Sea of Records" in San Francisco. (There

PERPETUAL MOTION

are two records of these concertos, played by Paul Badura-Skoda and Joerg Demus, which are still in my possession. It was from these that I first experienced the glories of the C major double concerto, which became one of my firm favourites.) But standing out still brighter in that sad summer was my discovery of Jascha Heifetz's bewitching performances of the Bach solo violin sonatas and partitas. I had heard Heifetz playing Bruch's "Scottish Fantasy" on one of my mother's records, and knew him to be a formidable violinist. So when I came across his recording of the Bach A minor sonata and E major partita for solo violin in a record store in San Francisco, out of curiosity I bought it. When I got home and played it, I was transfixed, hooked right from the sonata's dramatic opening chord. This was music-making of a transcendent order: supreme virtuosity in the service of works of ultimate artistry. The performance I first heard on that record, with its subtle portamenti, astonishingly exact double and triple-stopping, flexible, almost jazzy rhythms and sheer propulsiveness, marked the beginning of a lifelong addiction to Heifetz's playing. Heifetz's mastery of the violin remains for me at the summit of human achievement.

The following September I flew back to England, spending a few days with the Moffats before returning to Millfield. This was a most difficult time: my mother's death still haunted me; I could not sleep, and I suffered from palpitations of the heart. I recall that, after tossing and turning half the night, in desperation I woke Yvonne and John and appealed to them for help. They calmed me down as best they could.

I returned to Millfield to find that I had been moved from Joan's Kitchen to Etonhurst, a large house just acquired by the school near the village of Ashcott some 10 miles from Street. Mr. and Mrs. Dickens had been appointed to preside over this establishment of 50 or so boys. On my arrival I found to my surprise that I had been appointed a house prefect, an office which, among other things, gave one the freedom to read as late as one had a mind to, something for which I had good reason to be grateful. (Of negligible significance was the distinction of having one's name typed in capital letters on school lists.) I shared an annexe outside the main building with several other boys, including Mike Steele, who had moved with me from Joan's Kitchen, and a Bruneian rejoicing in the name Awangku Ismail bin Pengiran Mahmoud, who seemed to spend much of his time combing his dark, well-oiled and luxuriant hair. I struck up a friendship with a new arrival at the house, François Lalive, an amusing Franco-Swiss boy of about my age, who, it transpired, knew the Aquarones, my old pals from The Hague. A bit of a tearaway, François was a thorn in the side of the school authorities, something for which I rather admired him. He underwent frequent canings, but these only served to stiffen his resistance to a regime that he regarded as a joke. (I was later to see

something of him as he then was in the character played by Malcolm McDowell in Lindsay Anderson's anti-public-school film *If*.) Another bond was our common love of music. François was a more than passable flautist, and he also had an intriguing (at least to me) collection of classical records which had been passed on to him by his—evidently musical—parents. He gave me free access to this collection, two records in which I came to cherish: Elisabeth Schwarzkopf's virtuosic rendering of Bach's Cantata No. 51, *Lauchzet Gott in Allen Landen*, and Mozart's exquisite String Trio in E flat, K. 563, in the recording by the Bel Arte Trio. This latter was the source of my lifelong addiction to chamber music and the music of Mozart. When François left Millfield after just one year (I was to leave myself a term later) he was kind enough to bequeath me these records, which are still in my possession.

Geoff Howard had also moved to Etonhurst, which gave us an opportunity to renew our friendship and musical interests. He had acquired a recording (on 78s) of Beethoven's C Major Triple Concerto, op. 56, which we would play over and over again. Exposure to this work, of which I became very fond, finally dispelled the prejudice against Beethoven's music I had inherited from my mother. Geoff and I also became very enthusiastic about Khatchaturian's somewhat corny piano concerto—which Geoff, characteristically, called "Khatchy"—in the Moura Lympany recording.

A major disadvantage of the move to Etonhurst was the marked deterioration in the quality of the food. At Joan's Kitchen Yolande had seen to it that we were served decent meals, particularly in the evenings, but the fare at Etonhurst was execrable. I came to dread especially the liver stew which appeared at lunchtime with alarming frequency. This noxious concoction, served in rectangular aluminium pans, consisted of a number of turdlike lumps whose immersion in a glutinous dark brown sauce inevitably brought to mind the contents of a miniature cesspit. As if this were not punishment enough for one's existence, to follow there would be vast inedible plains of rice pudding, or, even worse, its macaroni equivalent. We all grumbled about the poor quality of the food, but I cannot recall that it improved while I was an inmate.

In early 1961 schoolboys throughout Britain awaited with impatience the impending publication, by Penguin Books, of the unexpurgated version of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. On the day of publication several of my mates rushed out to buy a copy of what had come universally to be known as "Lady C". But the notorious book turned out to be less titillating than expected, a letdown in fact, and everybody came to wonder what all the fuss had been about.

Meanwhile I continued my violin lessons, now with Mr. H. O. Dean, the school violin teacher. He was a pleasant, garrulous man with a bald

pate he attempted to cover with a thin swatch of hair rivalling the length of his bow which would come adrift and wave about as he played. No matter how badly I scraped, he invariably awarded me a B, *pour encourager*. He enjoyed talking about the violin and violinists. While naturally he revered my idol Jascha Heifetz, I recall that his own favourite was a violinist he called “Renato Rissi”—it was only later that I realized that he meant the American virtuoso Ruggiero Ricci, whose playing I, too, came greatly to admire.

At Etonhurst I acquired a battery-operated radio which enabled me to listen to the music programs on the BBC. One I recall particularly was “Music at Night”, which came on at 11.5 p.m. just after the news summary. This would be devoted to half an hour’s chamber music. Listening to Haydn quartets while snuggled up in bed kindled a delicious sense of intimacy I have never forgotten.

Despite the excellent teaching at Millfield I had not abandoned my efforts at self-instruction. While at Joan’s Kitchen I worked my way through the last two volumes of E. A. Maxwell’s *An Analytical Calculus*. I still recall my fascination with the contents of the blue-covered third volume on partial differentiation. I had been attracted by the appearance of Jacobi’s symbol “ ∂ ” since seeing it in one of my father’s engineering manuals, and I had a delightful sense of fulfillment when I began to understand what it actually *signified*. While at Etonhurst I read Hardy’s *Pure Mathematics* and, at the suggestion of E. H. Linfoot (of whom more below), made my first steps in complex analysis through Knopp’s *Elements of the Theory of Functions*. Nor had the theory of relativity lost its appeal for me. I dived headfirst into Hermann Weyl’s *Space-Time-Matter*, a work I understood only dimly, but which instilled in me a lifelong interest in Weyl. What working knowledge I had of general relativity I gained from Eddington’s *Mathematical Theory of Relativity*, from which I learned how to manipulate those intriguing entities known as tensors. But despite the fact that by the time I left Millfield I yielded to no one in my facility at raising, lowering—to say nothing of expunging—a tensor index, I had only the haziest notion of what a tensor actually *was*. The uneasy feeling that in physics I had divined the form but missed the substance was soon to push me away from physics and into the abstract mathematics of the 20th century, where form and substance are one and the same.

Devoting as I did most of my spare time to technical study meant that I did not do a great deal of more general reading during my Millfield years. Among the books I can remember reading are *War and Peace*; Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World Revisited*; Brian W. Aldiss’s melancholically memorable SF story collection *Space, Time and Nathaniel* (which I read in Tripoli); Arthur C. Clarke’s *The City and the Stars* (an SF *Bildungsroman* and one of my favourites at the time) and Frank M. Robinson’s *The Power*. Especially memorable were H. G.

Wells's *Collected Short Stories*, which I gobbled up while at Joan's Kitchen, one in particular, *The Man who Could Work Miracles*, leaving an indelible impression.

Now and then the Boss would summon me to Millfield House for an audience. I would wait until the ingenious set of miniature traffic lights mounted alongside the baize-covered door of his study changed to green, indicating that it was permissible to enter the inner sanctum. There Boss could usually be seen sitting in his shabby old armchair, a telephone in his lap, surrounded by teetering piles of books and papers. On one such occasion I recall him saying to me "I'm taking a few chaps up to Cambridge [or Oxford] next week to meet some people, and I want you to join us," or words to that effect. Then he got up—very tall and thin, it was as if he unfolded himself from his chair—went over to one of the piles, extracted a book from it, and handed it to me. "I think you'll find this interesting." (The book was, I recall, O. R. Frisch's *Handbook of Nuclear Physics*.) Indicating that the interview was at an end—he was a very busy man—he said he hoped that on the Cambridge (or Oxford) trip "I would be on my best behaviour."

These excursions to Oxford or Cambridge had been organized by the Boss in the first instance to provide an opportunity to show off his sporting stars. (One of these was Mark Cox, the tennis player, who later did in fact go to Cambridge.) I had been invited to join Boss's travelling circus in virtue of my putative intellectual precocity, with which the Boss hoped, presumably, to impress the dons. I recall going twice to Cambridge and once to Oxford. In Oxford we lodged at the Randolph Hotel, in Cambridge at the Red Lion (now long gone), an ancient establishment on Petty Cury whose lobby was actually a glassed-over lane running between Petty Cury and a parallel neighbouring street. On one of these visits to Cambridge I recall engaging in an earnest discussion with an Indian physicist; mercifully I cannot remember what I actually said. It was also in Cambridge that I was introduced to the Linfoots (of whom more below), who were to play such an important role in my life.

The Boss encouraged my teenage "prodigism" in other ways as well, for example, by entering me for 'O'-levels at 13 and 'A'-levels at 14. He even suggested that I give lectures to some of the other boys on my interests in physics and mathematics. So on Saturday afternoons I found myself in front of a blackboard in one of the makeshift classrooms (known as chicken runs) expatiating on the expanding universe to a tiny captive audience of my contemporaries—capital preparation for my future career as a dispenser of soporifics to bored students in the lecture theatre! I was acquainted with the steady-state theory of the cosmos and had had the brainstorm—which I also recall presenting in the form of an article in the school magazine—that the edge of our expanding universe at which objects are receding at near-

luminal velocity actually marks the boundary of another expanding universe whose corresponding edge marks the boundary of yet another expanding universe, and so on *ad infinitum*. So much for precocity!

By far the most significant piece of promotion the Boss did in my behalf—one for which I have good reason to be particularly grateful—was in sending me, along with P. D. Norton, up to Oxford early in 1961 to sit the physics scholarship examinations. As we were no more than 15 years old at the time the Boss cannot have expected success from either of us. Indeed just before we left, he told us (using one of the racing metaphors of which he was so fond) that we should regard our efforts there as a mere “preliminary canter”. I was entered at Exeter College, where, being Gloucestershire-born, I was eligible for one of the Stapeldon scholarships for those hailing from the west of England. So P.D. and I, abrim with excitement, took the train up to Oxford. On arrival we found that we had been billeted in Keble College. I cannot now recall where we actually sat the examinations, but over the next few days we scribbled away for all we were worth. I still associate the Oxford scholarship examinations with Beethoven’s Triple Concerto, to which I had been listening just before my departure for Oxford and which was still running through my mind. At the conclusion of the written examinations we trooped down the High to Magdalen College where lists of those summoned for interview had been posted. Along with my fellow-candidates, I anxiously scanned the blackboards set up in the cloisters of Magdalen’s Great Quad to see whether I had been numbered among the successful. I was thrilled to find my name listed there. I have only the haziest recollection of my interview at Exeter College the following day, but it must have gone well, for following my return to Millfield a letter arrived from the Exeter College authorities informing me of the award of an Open Scholarship in Physics. The fact that I was 15 at the time of the award¹³ resulted in a blaze of publicity, with newspaper reports and interviews, which the Boss must surely have felt could do the school’s reputation no harm. But even this, unquestionably my finest hour, was tinged with sadness, for I could not help thinking how proud my mother would have been of me had she been alive.

These newspaper reports now evoke mixed feelings of pride and embarrassment. In one of these the Boss cleverly blends caution and exaggeration by describing me as *potentially one step below Einstein*—I seem to recall that one paper actually went so far as to reproduce a photograph of the young Einstein alongside my grubby snapshot! As for the Daily Express interview, I can only hope that much of what I am

¹³ Actually, at 15 I was already superannuated by the standards of today’s prodigies. In the 1980s, Ruth Lawrence, for example, received her Oxford scholarship at the tender age of 10!

quoted as having said is misquotation. I wince when I read, for example, that *when other boys go to the cinema, I'd rather work on a mathematical problem or read a book on physics*. I refuse to believe that even three years at a British public school could have turned me into a prig capable of making such a remark!

While the Boss was reported as saying that I was not “socially or emotionally mature enough” to go up to Oxford at that time, Exeter College, it seems, was perfectly willing to admit me, at age 16, the following October. But the Boss had it in mind from the start for me to win a scholarship at King’s College, Cambridge, which he considered *la crème de la crème*. (Despite my being quoted in a newspaper interview as saying that *I have always wanted to go to Cambridge, and decided that long before I sat the Oxford scholarship*, this was really the Boss’s idea.) So he persuaded me to stay on at Millfield in order to prepare for the mathematics scholarship exams at Cambridge the following December. That summer I took, and passed, 4 ‘S’-levels, in pure and applied mathematics, physics, and chemistry, entitling me to a State Scholarship, which, in addition to the college scholarship, was to be my main source of support during my undergraduate years.

An unexpected piece of good fortune stemming from all this publicity was the renewal of communication with Michèle Aquarone and her family, with whom I had lost touch in the intervening years. Michèle, who was at this time attending a convent school in Paris, chanced to hear a radio report of my Oxford “triumph”. Learning from it that I was at Millfield, she wrote to me there; we later arranged to meet and have since remained the staunchest of friends.

In the summer of 1961 I returned to California where I was introduced to my father’s new wife, Margery. She must have been as apprehensive as I at the prospect of our first meeting, but I felt we hit it off right away, with no stepmother-stepson friction whatsoever. A decorous woman some years older than my father, she had been married for many years to a San Francisco doctor until his recent death. They had a handsome country house in a fashionable neighbourhood of Santa Cruz, a small town some eighty miles south of San Francisco. After Margery’s marriage to my father, it was decided to use this house, rather than our house in Mill Valley, as the family residence. So my father sold the Mill Valley house and the whole family moved to Santa Cruz—Margery’s house, of insufficient size to accommodate all of us, being enlarged with an annexe. I spent several pleasant summers in this house, furnished by Margery in exquisite taste, with elegant Chinese screens and lamps and occasional tables, pleasingly balanced by the greens and browns of exotic plants and bonsai trees. But I felt a stab of pain when I first saw Margery’s white baby grand piano in place of my mother’s beloved Blüthner, which my father had sold.

Margery and my father had found happiness together, and I was glad that, thanks to her, our shattered family life had been so quickly restored. Taking on a family like ours must have been a daunting task, but Margery's grace and generosity was equal to every obstacle.

Later that summer the editor of the local newspaper learned of my Oxford escapade and I was invited to his office for an interview. Insisting that I look presentable for the occasion, Margery drove me into town for a long overdue haircut. In an effort to impress the photographer (and those few readers of the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* foolish enough to stray into its back pages) I can be seen to have chalked on the blackboard a heterogeneous mixture of integral calculations and standard metric tensor formulas. The report of the interview itself is less wince-inducing than the one in the *Daily Express*, with the exception of the priceless *Asked if he was rated as a genius, John answered "I honestly don't know."* Modesty of this order takes the breath away.

In September I returned for what turned out to be my final term at Millfield to prepare for the mathematics scholarship examinations at King's College, Cambridge. I sat these in December, but, whatever the reason, fared less well than I had at Oxford. Perhaps this was because, unlike the Oxford examination, the Cambridge papers contained a non-negligible amount of projective geometry which, as I had said in the Santa Cruz interview, "got on my nerves"; perhaps also because by that time I had had my fill of exams. A more convincing, if less palatable explanation is that I failed to measure up against stiffer competition, King's being, after all, *la crème de la crème*. In any case I was told by the authorities at King's that, while they were perfectly willing to offer me a place at the college, I would be well advised to take up my Oxford scholarship¹⁴. Resolved to act on this advice, I left Millfield at the end of 1961, against the Boss's wishes, since he wanted me to try the Cambridge exams again. I think the Boss may have been hurt by my precipitate decision to leave Millfield, and, if so, I am truly sorry, because I have nothing but gratitude for all he did for me. I have always known how much I owe him, and Millfield.

Many years later I learned from Dermot Roaf, the Exeter College mathematics tutor, that my failure to secure a scholarship at King's may not, after all, have been wholly due to a mediocre examination performance on my part. It seems that when the Exeter authorities read in the press that I was not going to accept the scholarship they had offered me, the Rector of the college, Kenneth Wheare, wrote to the Boss asking what was going on, pointing out that I had signed an entry

¹⁴ I had already been encouraged to do this by John Dunn, one of the school's most brilliant pupils, a few years older than I, whom I got to know in my second year. He got a history scholarship to King's and remained there, becoming Cambridge's first Professor of Political Theory.

MILLFIELD, 1958-61

form which committed me to coming to Exeter (a fact of which I was either unaware or have forgotten). Characteristically, the Boss replied that he "did not care." Exeter also informed King's of the situation, and the authorities there replied that they agreed that I was committed to Exeter. So it came as no surprise to them that I was my awarded just a place, rather than a scholarship, at King's.