CHAPTER TWO – London (I)

THE LAST QUARTER of 1945 passed quietly enough as Stoke Newington, like the rest of London, slowly began to clean up after the bomb damage and general neglect of the fabric and infrastructure. A spartan version of pre-war normality ensued, I gather, accompanied by constant complaints about shortages and shopkeepers. I spent much of my time playing cowboys with my cousin John, using the padded arms of the chairs in our grandmother's "front room" as horses. This was the traditional, seldom used, formal ground-floor room with the usual appurtenances such as a glass-fronted corner cabinet with a few precious glasses and knick-knacks in it, once common in even the humblest homes. We took turns brandishing an airgun, provenance unknown, but apparently in working order. Fortunately, we had no ammunition…

At this stage my father rented an office in the Stalinist wedding-cake structure of the Senate House of the University of London in Bloomsbury, wartime home of the Ministry of Information (and sometime workplace of George Orwell), now temporarily available for favoured organisations such as the foreign press. When my parents found a house with more living space to rent in the relatively undamaged northern suburb of Muswell Hill from the beginning of 1946, he gave up the office because he was working for an evening paper, which meant having his copy ready to dictate over the often-interrupted telephone line to Amsterdam by early breakfast-time. Working from home meant he could save the precious journey time to the office. So he would get up at 5.30 a.m. and go out to buy all the available newspapers from *The Times* to the *Daily Worker* just as the local newsagent opened his doors.

They and the BBC Home Service radio news gave him enough material to write an early article and I might well wake up to the sound of his voice deliberately speaking loudly and clearly in slow gobbets of Dutch down the line to Holland.

The quality of the line was often frustratingly poor, which meant that my father, not the most patient of men, had to repeat himself constantly while fending off the foibles of the Dutch copytakers. They were clearly very similar to their British colleagues whose services I later enjoyed when dictating my own copy. Favourite spanners thrown into the creative works included such remarks as, “How are we spelling that, old boy?” and the ultimate weapon (usually one paragraph into the piece), “Is there much more of this?”

I was thus immersed in newsprint from the start as my reading ability improved. I had left Holland at the school starting age there of six, as it remains to this day, whereas in England I would have started at five. I thus had not had any schooling in Holland, or indeed in Dutch, and was a year behind in British terms. The seven or so months spent in Muswell Hill left little impression on me outside school, though there was a boy called Craig in my quiet street with its broad pavements, whose blue tricycle I envied, and there was a household nearby with an early bronze-age television set. For two terms I was entrusted to the French nuns then running the local Roman Catholic junior school in Pages Lane, Muswell Hill, round the corner from our house in Creighton Avenue. It was attached to the convent of St Martin de Tours (the school is now known as Our Lady of Muswell Hill). I owe this place three things: a decent accent in French from my first exposure to the language (we sang all

the French children's songs); the memory of a small trauma when I was publicly and falsely accused of stealing a toy engine from a fellow pupil and was sent home in disgrace, requiring my mother to make a rare ascent on to her metaphorical high horse; and the gain of one academic year, which I retained all the way through school and university, graduating at 20 years of age rather than the usual 21.

The only other domestic development I can recall in connection with Muswell Hill was my father's acquisition of his first car, a black Ford Anglia. I can remember being taken for rides in it, and can even recollect its registration number, HLT 146. But he could not keep it for long, as even in the1940s it was difficult to park in the area round South Kensington underground station after we moved.

My parents managed in summer 1946 to find a mansion flat in South Kensington on a controlled rent, to my mind the best move they ever made. Number 5 Harrington Court seemed vast, at any rate to me, as I roamed its generous spaces, no doubt exaggerated by my childish mind. It was divided by a long, dressed-concrete corridor with a leftward branch (as seen from the front door) at each end. The branch by the front door led to the large kitchen and the bathroom, the main corridor passed the expansive dining room to the left and the living room and three other rooms to the right; the second leftward branch led round the dining room to the spare room, which had a washbasin but usually served as a storeroom and (for me) as a playroom, though guests sometimes stayed in it. The rooms to the left were dark, grouped as they were round the light-well around which the flats were built, complete with continuous back-balconies and service lifts for rubbish. To the right of the main

corridor were, in a line, the living room with balcony and French doors, my father's study, my bedroom and my parents' bedroom. This better-lit side of the flat overlooked the Norfolk Hotel across the street (now renamed, intriguingly, the Ampersand); behind that was and is the *Lycée Français*. The French Institute is round the corner on Cromwell Place in what has become a strongly French-flavoured corner of London, even more so currently with French bookshops, cafés and restaurants. All this, the 49, 14 and other useful bus routes, and South Kensington underground station just across the road, offering the Piccadilly, District and Circle lines, made Harrington Court an excellent hub. Harrington Road was surfaced at that time with tarred wooden brick-sized blocks (which "sweated" and stank of tar on hot days) and there was a constantly busy taxi rank, complete with green hut for drivers, at the station end of the street. The red-brick building has long since been given a posh modern entrance and subdivided into much smaller and more expensive luxury service flats (but the taxis are still there, albeit *sans* hut; the wooden blocks have also gone). There was a greengrocer in the shop on the north-west corner of the block: there still is, to my amazement, though it now calls itself *Premiers Choix* in another manifestation of French influence. Round the corner in Glendower Place was what was said to be the first Indian restaurant to open in London after the war: there still is one, but under a different name.

Barely a quarter of a mile away were such delights as the Science Museum, a paradise for a boy with a liking for hands-on scientific exhibits, the Victoria and Albert and the Natural History museums (even then boasting a dinosaur in the main hall as it did until 2015) and the Commonwealth Institute, which offered free film shows about the vanishing British empire. Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park were a mile or so to

the north via Gloucester Road, Queen's Gate or Exhibition Road. As an only child I spent a lot of time on my own when not in school and enjoyed all these places without ever feeling exposed to the kind of dangers many parents worry about today as they block the roads with their Chelsea tractors on the "school run".

I found my own way to school on foot (by number 49 bus if it was raining, at a cost of 1d for an orange ticket) and never felt unsafe as I walked past Onslow Square, where the huge, then run-down houses with their grand, pillared porticos gave temporary lodging to countless families left stranded by the war, such as Poles and Maltese. Other such houses provided flats and bedsitters for a transient indigenous population. Inevitably these valuable properties were acquired soon enough by developers who refurbished them and sold or rented them at enormous profit from the 1960s onward. I knew a not very prosperous, large Irish family called Keene who lived in the expansive basement of a vast house in Queen's Gate (servants' quarters originally); two of their children, Jimmy and Peggy, were school mates. When I was in my teens a few years later I was a guest in a rare, single-occupancy house of this type, leased to a Dutch diplomat friend of my father, whose family put me up when my parents went abroad on holiday. The living room alone was the size of an aircraft hangar, it seemed to me, and there were dozens of rooms on four floors plus the basement.

The move from the northern suburb of London N16 to the inner south-western suburb of SW7 of course meant a change of school. So my parents took me to the Oratory junior school in Cale Street, Chelsea, about half a mile from our new home,

towards the end of the 1946 school summer holidays. Like a meeting of the Privy Council (an absurd but appealing comparison) the interview took place with everyone standing, including my parents and the formidable Miss Malay, the deputy headmistress, who must have been close to retirement. Would I go into the top class of the infants or the lowest form of the primary school - that was the question. Having been born in October 1939 I should, strictly speaking, have gone into the former as I would still be under seven when the new term began. The outcome turned on a single issue: did I know my "times tables"? This was something the blessed nuns of St Martin de Tours had dinned into me, and I rattled off the answers without having to think. So I jumped a year and thenceforward was almost always the youngest in my class. In reality there were only two months in it: I would automatically have gone into the primary school had I been born by the end of August 1939. Nonetheless I saved a whole year in the long haul to university graduation.

The Oratory Primary school still stands today, outwardly unchanged with its rooftop playground, supplemented by a small walled courtyard at ground level. The head teacher then was Sister Raphael of the order of St Philip Neri, patron saint of the related Oratory church in Brompton Road, in the Brompton area of Kensington, then as now a "fashionable" parish with lots of foreign Catholics from the many nearby embassies as well as wealthy Kensingtonians. I went through the usual Catholic rituals in the big Italianate, domed church - first confession, first communion (Miss Malay gave me a commemorative booklet for the latter), and eventually confirmation. I even joined the cub-scout troop there - for just six weeks, as I soon found it was not for me, even though my mother had wasted a lot of money on a

uniform and such extra accoutrements as a woggle. I was too much of a bashful loner for that kind of thing and I believe my keen sense of the ridiculous was already developing. Long before anyone began raising concerns about climate change, the year 1947 featured a record, savage winter and acute fuel shortage in its opening weeks, and a freakishly hot summer just a few months later, during which my mother's friend Prien Heuseveldt came over on a visit from Alkmaar. I recall the two women coming close to fainting in the heat, helplessly fanning themselves on our balcony.

All the teachers on the Oratory primary staff were women except for one, Mr O'Hanlon, a plangent ex-army Ulsterman with a short temper and a brush cut, whose favoured punishment in those casually violent days was a stinging slap with the open hand against the back of the knee, a dangerous practice: one boy suffered a burst blood vessel. I also remember the gentle Miss Curry of the second form, whom everyone loved, Miss James and Mrs Stitch in the final year. Many of my fellow Catholic pupils were Irish or of Irish descent and lived in the "dwellings" on several large local estates established for the working poor by Victorian philanthropists - the Samuel Lewis or Guinness trusts or the Sutton estate. In those days Chelsea was nothing like the egregiously wealthy place most of it is today - even the King's Road and its side-streets and squares were run down and inexpensive to rent. But the "dwellings" soldier on amid what are now some of the most costly homes in Europe, if not the world. In his early exploration of the area, then decidedly down-at-heel, my father was delighted to find a horse butcher. Continental Europeans are accustomed to horsemeat - and in austere, post-war Britain it was not "on the ration"

- neither was rabbit - both of which my mother happily served up for us from time to time.

It was a good school and I managed to flourish there. The main academic event was the old "eleven-plus" state examination in the final year. A high mark meant admission to a grammar school rather than a secondary-modern, a "central" or a technical school. This system was scrapped eventually, along with nearly all grammar schools, because it condemned many pupils to a second-class education at the age of eleven (there was a second chance at fourteen, rarely used but intended to give eleven-plus failures a chance to step up to a grammar school). Then as now academic ability was much more highly prized than others: this is a problem that the ever-more fragmented English school system is still nowhere near solving. The Oratory teachers decided on an experiment and made a girl called Ann Kember and me sit the 1949 exam papers after the event. We both passed this dummy run and when we sat the exam in earnest in 1950, we sailed through. Once again I was officially too young at eleven minus...

Extra-curricular or playtime activities at the school included football with coats as goalposts in the large open space (now smartened up, astroturfed and run by the local council) in front of the large St Luke's Anglican church across the road (the playgrounds of the school itself were far too small). There were two main unathletic games played in the school playgrounds: in the lower one we used to compete for cigarette cards, which were flicked against the wall: if your card fully overlapped one in the accumulating heap, you collected them all. These cards were a pre-war

phenomenon which vanished after it. Cigarette manufacturers would include one or two of a given set in each packet of ten or 20: there were sets of usually fifty cards to collect featuring cricketers, cars, military uniforms, steam engines, flowers and the like. Serious collectors would swap duplicate cards for those they lacked and stick them in albums. There are such collectors to this day, and of course their value has shot up. One brand supplying a poor alternative at that time was an execrable cigarette called Turf, one of the very cheapest and nastiest makes. Each packet of ten featured one, and packet of 20 two, crude blue-wash pictures of (for example) footballers, and you had to cut them out of the sliding tray of the packet in which the cigarettes were sold. Needless to say we actually tried to smoke one or two of the awful products, but addiction was staved off until senior school.

The other great playground pursuit was fivestones, officially known (though not to us) as jacks, in which, while sitting on the ground, you threw one stone into the air and snatched up various combinations or settings of the remaining four before catching the falling stone. If you fumbled, it was your neighbour's turn. We all had well-worn sets of stones in our pockets which we would produce in a flash to challenge each other. Boys could play football under supervision by a volunteer teacher or priest in Battersea Park, reached by the trusty 49 bus, on Saturday mornings if they wished, and I often did, making the most of my natural left-footedness (although I am equally naturally right-handed). I was no genius at the "beautiful game", but I made the second eleven for a while at secondary school. Easily winded thanks to smoking, I gave up playing after a game or two at university.

Outside school I had one particular friend, who lived round the corner in Bute Street, where his grandfather ran a greasy-spoon style cafe (a cut or two above the basic, as the area expected even then). Eduardo, usually known as Edward or Eddy, was slightly older than me by a month or two and the family - grandfather Orsi, his daughter (Eddy's mother) and the boy himself, an only child and my fellow pupil at the Oratory. His father, an Italian prisoner of war surnamed Rustioni, was lost in September 1942 with the SS *Laconia,* a British troopship with 1,800 Italian PoWs aboard en route to Canada. The converted liner was tragically sunk by the German submarine *U156* (Commander Werner Hartenstein, who tried to remedy his blunder by staging a remarkable rescue effort that ended in more tragedy when Allied aircraft attacked the survivors in their boats. I researched this sad incident in depth for my book on the Battle of the Atlantic). Mr Orsi, who called me Girolamo (Italian for Hieronymus/Jeroen/Jerome), was the closest in shape to a human sphere that I have ever seen. His daughter was often in tears for her lost husband. There were also one or two fellow-pupils with whom I exchanged home visits or accompanied to "Saturday morning pictures" at the ABC cinema in Fulham Road. It cost 6d to get in with your membership card, and there was a constant diet of ancient western films featuring Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers and the like.

Eddy and I played on the open bombsite that straddled the Harrington-Road end of Bute Street (the cafe was at the other end), where basements and cellars provided caves to hide in and builders left piles of bricks lying around from which we could build our own precarious hideouts. A modern health-and-safety enforcer would have had several fits, but we suffered no more than the odd scratch, bruise or torn trousers until the site was fenced off as rebuilding progressed. Eddy and his family lived in a

small maisonette opposite the cafe and above a sweetshop run by an elderly spinster called Emmeline, whom we constantly pestered for "off the ration" sweets, which she was sometimes kind or daft enough to give us. The cafe is now a simple Italian restaurant. Halfway along the street was an old-fashioned, "something for the weekend, sir?" style barber's shop to which my father took me for haircuts. I believe the price was 9d (ninepence in pre-decimal money). All this is long gone: virtually the entire street has been rebuilt, complete with boutiques, part of the French empire.

My parents got permission from Sister Raphael to take me out of school a few days before the end of the autumn term in 1949 for a trip to Paris in time for Christmas. Ungraciously I picked up a stomach bug and spent most of the time in bed in our hotel, which must have spoiled the whole thing for them. It was my first trip away from London since arriving there. Understandably they usually left me with other people when they went on holiday after that, although by no means always. I can remember seaside holidays with them at such resorts as Bognor Regis and Dawlish with its dramatic railway line along the beach.

Eddy and I went our separate ways after primary school, he to the Oratory Senior (secondary modern), and I to a more academic institution. We saw each other from time to time over the years until I went north, but inevitably lost touch in the end.

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So, still aged ten, I moved on in September 1950 to the Cardinal Vaughan Grammar School in the Holland Park area of Kensington (now the Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School after it became a comprehensive in 1977). I caught the 49 bus virtually outside my front door and got off at the top end of Holland Road, a few yards from the imposing pink sandstone building which had been a convent until the school was founded in 1914 by public subscription, in memory of the late Cardinal Herbert Vaughan, Archbishop of Westminster.

Looking back on my schooling, I recognise that I was unusually privileged, even though my parents did not have to pay a penny in fees. My schools were "voluntary aided" in the terminology of the time, Roman Catholic but part of the state system, which funded them up to ninety per cent, with the church paying the balance for the right to indoctrinate the pupils. They were chosen from a wide catchment area on a religious basis: many fellow-pupils had to make journeys verging on the heroic between home and school. The supervising authority was the late and sometimes lamented London County Council (LCC), which encompassed only the inner boroughs of what is now Greater London. The teachers in both my schools were mostly lay people, with one nun and one teacher in a "mufti" order at the primary and the aloof intellectual Monsignor Canon Butcher as head with three other priests at the grammar, which was a day-school. When I was there it was a two-form entry school for boys with some 300 pupils (less than a third of present numbers, which now include girls at sixth-form level only). Today it is three times the size. In my time there was a leavening of foreign boys, including me, several Poles, a Lithuanian, an Italian and a German diplomat's son, who inevitably came in for a lot of ragging.

The Vaughan copied many of the customs and practices of the English public school, requiring correct uniform at all times (at least there was a choice, between a hard-wearing, rough-textured grey suit and a black blazer with grey trousers). The blazer badge was the rather splendid school coat of arms, a full-blown cardinal's red hat, complete with multi-storey tassels. The suits were available from a single retailer, Hope Brothers of Kensington High Street and Marble Arch. A black cap with badge had to be worn until and including the fourth form; the cap had a button on top in one of four colours representing the school "houses" (metaphorical only; they were not separate buildings). In my first two years we had Saturday morning school, followed by football at the school's spacious sports ground in Twickenham, next door to the rugby stadium (for which it provides a lucrative car park on match days). Wednesday afternoons were also devoted to football (cricket or swimming in summer). When Mgr Butcher moved on to head the Catholic seminary at Ware in Hertfordshire he was succeeded as headmaster in 1952 by the bluff Father Kenefeck (a Cambridge rugby blue with a Cornish name, later also a Monsignor-Canon) we went over to a normal five-day week. Strong discipline was and probably remains the key to the school's success then and now.

The form-master for class 1B was an exceptional individual called Robert Kellett. He was ambidextrous, and introduced himself to us by writing his name with both hands simultaneously, using two pieces of chalk, the left hand version mirroring the right. He was the principal (in fact I think the only) science master at the school, and he laid on entertaining experiments in our chemistry classes. By the time I was

preparing for my O-level exams, he doubled his own workload by introducing physics into the curriculum and I was one of the first to sit and pass the "new" O-level along with chemistry. I was not particularly inclined towards science, but his enthusiasm and dedication were catching and I proved to be something of an all-rounder, managing to pass every public exam I took. In addition to his inspiring and punctilious teaching - he stopped talking when the bell went, even if in mid-sentence - he plastered the school walls with material on fine art. Posters, magazine articles and photographs with his captions lined the walls of the main staircase up to the landing outside the assembly hall. Out of boundless love for the school and the pupils he carried on with this kind of voluntary work after his retirement until into his eighties.

The only woman on the staff (apart from the headmaster's secretary, nicknamed Hecate) was Miss Simpson, a Cambridge graduate who taught the juniors Latin but could not control boisterous boys, sometimes breaking down in tears. Then there was the saturnine Mr Roe, all of five feet tall with his umbrella up, who taught us English at junior level and French in the fifth and sixth forms. He had eleven children and used to drive to school in an old "bull" taxi because it could carry most of them (in the carefree days before seatbelts). He had to put cushions on the driver's seat so he could see out of the windscreen. Mr Roe supplied a portent of sorts: in the first form he told us to write a homework essay on the life-story of a watch (i.e. a timepiece), and for some reason this triggered my imagination. At any rate he liked my effort (written in green ink, I recall) sufficiently to read it out to the upper sixth.

Mr Parkinson with his bushy moustache taught history, ancient and modern, in the upper school and stood out for his broad Yorkshire accent, his pipe and his mean marking (I once came top in an ancient history test - with a mark of just 37 per cent; I did much better than that in the public exam).

Father Groves taught English higher up the school and was the most dedicated cigarette smoker I have ever seen. He would take an enormous drag which seemed to go down so deep that no wisp of smoke ever came out. A lively Irish Father Cooney taught English and an earnest Father Fisher English history; both took us for football, as did Kenefeck himself occasionally.

Mr Handyside taught French to the junior and middle forms, perhaps the nicest teacher I ever had, always joking and looking relaxed (deceptive because he had survived a heart attack and was away for months). He led the four school trips I was lucky enough to go on, to France, Switzerland, Austria and West Germany. My parents also sent me to Holland from time to time to stay with relatives or friends.

Mr Mahon, a neat figure in a worn tweed suit with a carefully tended army officer's moustache, taught mathematics and had a taste for precision punishment: he made uncooperative or stupid pupils kneel at the front of the class for the duration of the lesson (we were also often made to kneel in the corridors for some petty offence, like running or shouting, by prefects as well as teachers, perhaps to remind us that it was

a Catholic school). But Mahon's speciality was a stinging slap on the cheek, for which he would carefully line up his victim's head at the most exposed and convenient angle before letting fly.

Mr Cross, late of the Parachute Regiment, took us for physical training in his ex-army sweatsuit. And then there was Mr Creaven, a short, squat Irishman with a fearsome temper who taught English but whose main title was Discipline Master. It was his duty to hand out the thrashings for particularly recalcitrant pupils, which he did with a leather strap attached to a wooden handle. The blows could be heard all over the building. One boy who had played truant for several weeks received the most uninhibited belting I can remember. We listened in silence until he emerged ashen-faced, but without having uttered a sound. Shortly afterwards he volunteered for the Coldstream Guards as a boy soldier. I doubt whether army training had anything as painful to offer. I receive "six of the best" just once, from Mgr Butcher himself, using a classic Greyfriars-style whippy cane. I had taken part in a small riot during which several of us ran round the school brandishing a noticeboard, still attached to its batten which had come loose from a wall (with our assistance), like a battle standard. Richly deserved, I dare say, but inconceivable today.

The gentle Mr Veale took us for art lessons, later being ordained a priest. A sad gap in an otherwise sound if not outstanding all-round education was in the field of music. We had the services of Mr Laloux, a Belgian with half the alphabet after his name, a distinguished musician who played the organ at the Oratory church and elsewhere. What he could not do was teach. His lessons turned into rowdy

insurrections every time and I learned virtually nothing. I have tried to make up for it since by finding out (encouraged by my musical wife) what music I like from the classical repertoire and going to the Proms and other concerts, buying records and CDs and learning to appreciate music (I once went so far as to take a course in it in later life). But beyond playing the mouthorgan by ear (metaphorically), inspired by the skiffle craze of the 1950s, I know nothing of musical instruments (my wife played classical and folk guitar and was re-learning the piano even at the very end of her life).

But the curricular choices were very narrow. From 1B I went on to 2A, 3A and 4A and then the "lower sixth" - the fifth year for those destined to go on to the sixth form and A-levels. The so-called fifth form was for those leaving at sixteen after O-levels. We all had Latin from the beginning and were introduced to Greek (in the A-stream) in the third form. This stream was meant to go on to the classical sixth and sit A-level exams in Greek, Latin and Ancient History; the other B or "modern" stream was expected to sit "Latin for Modern Studies," French and Modern History. Between the two six-form classrooms on the second or top floor stood a large, beautifully detailed white scale-model of the Athenian Acropolis in a glass case, provenance unknown to me. Only in my last two years was a third sixth form, for English studies, brought in by Fr Groves (science A-levels were introduced only many years after I left). Each sixth form comprised a first and a second year who were taught together, and we were all expected to take our A-levels after just one year, the second being aimed at the somewhat harder state scholarship or S-level exams. The set texts for A and S were the same, which made teaching easier, and there were only about 15 pupils altogether in each sixth form, which entailed some very intensive study and close

attention from the teachers. So I was still only sixteen when I got my three classical A-levels, whereas in a typical grammar school (and without the Muswell Hill jump) I would have sat them at eighteen. In my final school year, I was also appointed deputy head prefect, but was told I would not become head boy of my house (named after the Blessed Cuthbert Mayne, an Elizabethan Catholic martyr) because I was not outstanding in sport, which I correctly took to mean that it might have been otherwise had I made the football first eleven. Since I never expected the appointment, I was not desolated.

I was fourteen when I had an accident at Chelsea swimming baths - I slipped and fell while running (of course) and knocked myself out. I was taken by ambulance to St Stephen's hospital in Fulham Road (now Westminster and Chelsea hospital) with suspected concussion and kept in for observation for a couple of days. Non-slip rubber mats were soon installed at the baths in my honour. I fell in love with the nurses and conceived the romantic notion of becoming a doctor. I was coming up to the two O-levels for which I had been entered one year early (French and English History) and missed the French oral, although I was soon fully fit to sit and pass both written exams comfortably. I got another six O-levels at the "proper" time in my fifth year. In my first year in the upper sixth I learned that there was a scholarship available at Downing College, Cambridge, for classically educated students to study medicine - the endowment of a rich Victorian doctor who felt his profession needed members with a broad education in the humanities as well as anatomy, physiology and the rest. The idea was that I would sit for this scholarship after my second year in the sixth form.

Fortunately for the public at large I gave up my medical ambitions and the accompanying idea of Cambridge and then tried to bend the school system. I suggested taking a French A-level in my second year in the sixth form, with a view to reading for a degree in French and Latin. French had always been my strongest subject all the way up the school (the nuns again?) and we continued with French literature (such as Racine's reworked classical Greek plays) for its own sake in the sixth form, even while concentrating on classical studies. Only one pupil was consistently better in French, an Italian called Guido Donini, who was more seriously bullied for his foreign name than I was for mine. He eventually became a professor of classics at Turin and sent me, out of the blue in the 1970s, having seen my byline in *The Times*, a poem in Latin hexameters about Chelsea football team! My father turned out in my support and visited Fr Kenefeck to try to persuade him to fall in with this revolutionary plan, but he declined, saying he expected me to get a state scholarship in my final year.

The result, predictably, was (a) no French A-level and (b) no state scholarship. From then on until graduation I lacked true dedication, failing to make the extra effort needed for the S-levels (even so it was a very near miss - I got the three A-levels all over again). I became a minimalist, doing the necessary but little or no more to get by. I already had enough to get into university; what was more, I had been for interviews at Durham and actually got a place to study classics. This was my default option if I wanted to get a degree without time-consuming work for extra qualifications from elsewhere or hanging about and losing a year by sitting for Oxbridge scholarship exams (for some reason held in October, which meant nearly a year's wait to start). Despite my year's advantage I seemed to be in a hurry to

complete my education, even though at that stage I had no idea of what career I would pursue. The concept of the "gap year" did not exist then.

I have mentioned many of my teachers but have left the best until last. Many people have spoken or written of a teacher who was a decisive influence in their lives. Mine was John Richards, who taught classics in the sixth form. For some reason lost in the mist his nickname was Trog (as in troglodyte), perhaps because he was reserved and sometimes grunted in reply to questions, a neatly dressed bachelor in his late 30s with no other discernible resemblance to a cave-dweller. He kept my motivation sufficiently alive, broadening my mind, to carry me through to university and a degree by the simple but seldom pedagogically achieved method of making classical literature seem interesting (nobody achieved it when I was at university, where I fortunately had just the one inspiring lecturer, in philology). He tried, and usually managed, to conceal a rich sense of humour, but could not always prevent it from revealing its presence by a discreet twitch of the lip. A first-class graduate from Peterhouse, Cambridge, he went far beyond his remit of preparing us for classical A-levels. In the prolonged limbo between public or mock exams and the end of term he had us reading Shakespeare plays, poetry and other great literature, and not just reading but analysing them: he had after all given us the basic intellectual tools for this by immersing us in the likes of Sophocles and Euripides. *King Lear* was one challenging choice, and I have thought of Mr Richards gratefully every time I have seen it performed. Insofar as I understand anything about the play, it is due to him. He paid me a rare, entirely deadpan compliment for my part in our reading of *Lear* - as if I had been born for it, he said. Then I saw the giveaway lip-twitch and the class laughed: my role had been the Fool... I do not know what became of this paragon of

the teaching profession beyond the facts that he left the Vaughan a few years later, went north (I believe to Shropshire) and got married.

In spring 1953 my parents and I moved from blessed Harrington Court to a house on Gunnersbury Avenue, then as now the beginning or end (depending on direction of travel) of the abominable North Circular Road. My parents actually bought this place on a mortgage, the only time they ever owned a home rather than renting it. It must previously have belonged to a journalist because I found a nameboard under the stairs bearing the word "Fleetway". It was a pleasant enough terrace house, slightly more spacious than the average three-bedroom home, with gardens at front and rear. My room had a balcony overlooking the road and Gunnersbury Park opposite. There was a lawn between us and the appalling (even then) traffic on the North Circular A406; but we were still far too close to the heavy trucks that roared past, and I have no idea why my parents chose it, unless it was a bargain. I believe they habitually made indifferent housing choices because my father lost patience with the whole process and was inclined to take the first option. We lived on a slight bend of the A406, and during a great, stinking London pea-souper fog (which led to the passage of the Clean Air Act) a truck mounted the pavement and fortunately ground to a halt - in our front garden. About a year later my parents sold the house and rented another flat on the top floor of Oakhill Court, close to East Putney underground station, thus exchanging the North Circular for the South Circular road (A205). Two years after that they moved to another flat in the same building, on the upper ground floor - second only to Harrington Court in comfort and convenience. Their last home in London before their return to Holland in 1967 was a flat in Chiswick Village, a

huge, featureless complex of apartment blocks. Once again I have no idea why they chose it. My father was ill by then, as will become clear.

My father liked a drink and was an enthusiastic participant in a prosperous, middle-class version of pub culture (in fairness I have to say I never saw him drunk). From the earliest time of living in South Kensington, he would visit the Cranleigh Arms (now a restaurant) in Fulham Road, a short walk from our home. A little later, from the very early 1950s, he became a regular at the Princess of Wales pub in Dovehouse Street, Chelsea, easily reached by the 49 bus. It became a French, indeed a French-owned, restaurant in 1998, restyled *Le Colombier* (dovecote - the French are as fond of puns as the English). He remained loyal to the place even after the moves to Gunnersbury (whence the Piccadilly Line ran from Acton Town to South Kensington), East Putney and Chiswick. While living in Putney he bought a car for the first time in several years: fortunately, he returned to Holland two years before the breathalyser was introduced, as he drove to the Princess of Wales most evenings.

The place, I learned many years later from one of its former denizens, was more like a club than a pub, especially in the evenings, and an interesting coterie of English eccentrics foregathered there (some of whom I met when I was legally entitled to join them for a drink). Their wives, including my mother who sometimes went too: her favourite tipple was gin and orange, a very 1940s drink. My parents did not socialise much otherwise, although one or two friends came to supper occasionally, but my father kept in touch with a handful of Dutch colleagues from such papers as the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (now *NRC-Handelsblad*) - a nice man called

Colenbrander who lived in Hampstead and had a pretty daughter my age - the *Volkskrant, De Telegraaf, Het Parool*. A close colleague was Michel van der Plas of *Elsevier* magazine, a weekly which eventually absorbed what was left of *De Tijd* before itself fading away. The little coterie of Dutch correspondents often met at the Netherlands embassy at Hyde Park Gate. They recognised my father as the best writer among them.

The landlord of the Princess of Wales was called Charles Hockey (which may have been an anglicisation of the Irish name Haughey), supported by his wife Lois. He ran a tight ship, and customers to whom he took a dislike (not a few) were shown a polite cold shoulder and left in no doubt that their future absence would be appreciated. The clientele included a well-known portraitist, a famous character actor, a couple of retired bank managers, at least two men with mysterious connections to the security services, several Shell executives, a former destroyer commander turned wealthy stockbroker, one or two senior journalists, a former lord mayor of Canterbury and assorted businessmen. My father often recounted the details of the previous evening the next morning. Conversation, I learned, was generally of high quality, and my father discreetly mined it, along with the very English ambience of the place, for his regular features on the British way of life. They were very popular in Holland, and no fewer than four collections of these often quirky pieces were published in book form. My favourite expounded his theory that the English were descended from the ancient Babylonians because, according to Herodotus, they liked to walk around with umbrellas that they never used.

In my last year at school, I visited the north of England for the first time. I went on a retreat run by the Christian Brothers at their college in Middleton, near Manchester. Unexpectedly, it was enormous fun. I remember a boy called Geoff who was a genius at the piano and led us in uproarious and not entirely holy singsongs. It was a Catholic occasion, of course, and we endured periods of silent contemplation, various lectures, homilies and monastery-style readings from scripture over refectory meals. But the only part I can remember clearly, apart from the singsongs, was a talk by an old Jesuit priest who exhibited encouraging signs of *joie de vivre*. One sterling piece of advice he gave us hormonally disturbed youths was on the subject of "dirty jokes," an art-form clearly not unknown to us (or him). He told us not to worry too much about them: "if the joke is funnier than it is dirty, it's OK," he said.

Back at school we had a brief assembly with a prayer every morning, but on Friday mass was said by the headmaster, also in the assembly hall. I can recall clearly one or two such occasions when there was an unusual anticipatory buzz of conversation: one was on the death of King George VI on 6 February 1952; another, curiously, was on the morning Ruth Ellis, the last woman to be hanged in Britain, was executed at Holloway prison (13 July 1955). There was also a benediction service on Wednesday afternoons in the small school chapel. When it came to my turn to serve as the celebrant's assistant or altar-boy at mass, I sweated like a stuck pig from nerves, a trait I only managed to overcome later in life, when I actually enjoyed public speaking. I was an alto in the school choir until my voice broke, leaving me with a low-range croak.

I should finally make it clear that life at the Vaughan was not entirely devoted to high achievement and religion. In the sixth form in particular, assisted by the Nelsonian blind eyes of most of our teachers, we managed to develop some of the lesser vices. We went to a pub called the Jolly Gardeners in Isleworth after football at the sports ground. There was also a pub within lunchbreak walking distance in the Holland Park area. Smoking became almost a matter of course (it took me thirty years to stop); and we also played a singularly tedious card game called three-card brag - a sort of pared-down poker for halfwits - for halfpennies and pennies in the "modern" sixth form-room. This happened almost every lunch time, as the school playground was very constricted (although there was enough space for a form of football with a ball made of bundled paper held together by elastic bands, or cricket played with table-tennis paddles and a ping-pong ball against a wicket sketched on a wall with chalk). Someone kept a not very efficient lookout for a master visiting the top floor where the sixth form lived, whereupon the lid of the old-fashioned wooden desk on which the card game was focused was tipped up, allowing all the money and loose cards to disappear down the slot, unplayed cards went into pockets and feeble attempts were made to wave away the thick fug of smoke. Amazingly, the masters affected not to notice, even as they coughed their way back down the stairs. A more innocent lunchtime activity was loud singing of traditional songs such as *Green grow the rushes-O* and one or two from the less respectable canon of rugby ditties. I have no idea how this custom arose but I have never sung with such gusto before or since.

It was during the first term of my final school year that I was allotted my university place. A boy who had been in the senior year of the sixth when I was in the junior was nearing the end of his first term at St Cuthbert's Society, a mostly non-

residential college at the University of Durham. He came back to the school on a visit and was bursting with enthusiasm for the place. His name is Derrick Phillips. Unbeknownst I had been stalking him from one year below not only at the Vaughan but also at the Oratory (I discovered the latter, to my amazement, only at a reunion when I was in my seventies!). On his recommendation, three of us in my group applied to the Society and to the university Classics department. We went up to Durham by train on the same day for our double interviews, with the Society's Senior Tutor, Charles Holmes (a wonderfully entertaining eccentric with a love of railways), and the Professor of Latin, and were awarded a place. Two of us took up the offer, the other being Brian Turner, one of the cleverest people I have ever met. So I was once again fated to follow Derrick, as ever one year behind.

From the outset Durham was a far more important part of my life than merely the place from which I would graduate with an honours degree in Classical and General Literature. The cliché says that schooldays are "the happiest days of your life" – a rarity among clichés for normally being untrue. I can only say that my time in Durham was happier, though my schooldays, apart from a little mild bullying over my foreign name which I managed to fend off, were mostly positive and the education I received was mostly of high quality.

But I was the only child of fairly buttoned-up parents, and I had spent my puberty in a Catholic boys' school where I was taught religious (and ethical and moral) studies by celibate priests. None of these worthy men, I am absolutely sure, disgraced their cloth in the way so many of their colleagues have done in sexual matters over the

years, but the fact remains that when it came to sex they had, I believe, virtually no practical experience but only theoretical and doctrinal knowledge. We took them seriously because we knew no better. My ignorance was cosmic, my "knowledge" derived from a bit of euphemistic literature, grubby talk at school and stolen readings from books we were not meant to know about (such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* in my case, sneaked from my father's shelves). I learned virtually nothing from my parents. In the finest Catholic tradition, however, I became an expert in guilt - a concept encouraged by the sacrament of personal confession, where a fundamentally innocent young person was driven to scrape the barrel to find one or two "sins" to confess, such as "impure thoughts". I don't believe I committed any heinous crimes, although I once shoplifted something (no idea what) from Woolworths - but that was a national sport at the time.

For each of the last three years at school, in addition to studying for the state exams, we had to sit an exam set by the Conference of Catholic Colleges, first at their equivalent of O-level and then at A-level in two parts. We were taught “apologetics and Christian doctrine”, encompassing not only the teachings of the church on religious, moral and ethical matters but also how to defend the faith in argument. For a later career in teaching at Catholic schools it was essential to pass these with a “credit” mark as well as meeting the state’s criteria for teaching. I performed as required but merely regarded these tests as a waste of time, then and later.

I met a witty girl called Jennifer from Lewes in Sussex while we were on trips with our respective schools to the Rhineland in 1955, when I was fifteen, and we kept in

touch for about a year, when we fell out irredeemably over the Suez crisis: she was for the attack on Egypt, I was against. I lived in a top-floor flat in East Putney overlooking the South Circular Road at the time and watched the military convoys passing on their way to the coast. As schoolboys will, I noted some registration numbers - and observed that the same vehicles passed by again later in the day, in a different order. This was surely a motorised version of sabre-rattling. A neighbour who was an Iraqi diplomat (and who shared our party telephone line, to my father's annoyance, merrily chatting away in Arabic when he wanted to dictate a story in Dutch) seemed particularly interested. A year or so later, in my last school year, I used to travel by trolleybus from Putney as far as Hammersmith with a girl who attended the Sacred Heart convent school there. Once, or it may have been twice, I persuaded her to come to the cinema with me and went to far as holding hands in the dark. That was the sum total of my first-hand knowledge of the opposite sex, a deficit in my education rather more important than music.

In a rare display of forethought my father decided to let me learn to drive a car in the long vacation between leaving school and going up to university. He owned a pale blue, four-door Ford Prefect at the time, a rough and ready car with only three forward gears. He set out to teach me the basics himself, but I am happy to report that after a couple of extremely nervous drives round the Putney area - I was nervous because he was, and vice versa - he bit the bullet and signed me up with the British School of Motoring (BSM). I took the test in Wimbledon, south-west London, and passed first time. This was much against my expectations as I had been forced to make a real emergency stop at a crossroads, when a car suddenly appeared from behind a parked pantechnicon and roared forward to try to get through the amber

traffic light as I made to turn right. I hit the brakes - and the examiner banged his head on the windscreen (no seatbelts in those days). I was convinced that I had blown it, relaxed and drove comfortably back to the test centre. I was so pleasantly surprised to have passed that I noticed only later that the examiner had not bothered to tell me to make a fake emergency stop. Perhaps he was still dazed when he wrote his report.

Those who fail to learn the lessons of history are condemned to repeat them. When my wife told me in the mid-sixties that she wanted to learn to drive, I decided to teach her myself. After a couple of sessions in Richmond Park which brought us closer to divorce than almost anything else that happened to us in fifty years, I too bit the bullet and called in the BSM.