

Huyton Hill Preparatory School

By Christopher Malcomson (1941-1949)

Since coming to the States I have been researching American History and am so impressed with the Founding Fathers, Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton and Adams who were a truly remarkable set of people. They managed to put together, even with their serious differences, the foundation for a great nation. My reading recently included Kevin Hayes's "Road to Monticello", a biography of Jefferson, and it was only whilst reading this book that I really began, for the first time, to think about what democracy and education means.

It is very clear that I did not have anything like the education that Jefferson would have expected to be of reasonable standard. In England it was normal for privately educated children to go to a Preparatory Boarding School from the ages of eight to thirteen and then to go on to a Public School, again boarding and private, followed at eighteen by University.

Due to the war, I went to boarding school aged four and a half as my parents wanted to keep me away from the bombing which was being concentrated on the dock cities of England. It feels now as if all the children in England were moved out of the towns to avoid the bombing. In London there was a mass evacuation at the start of the war but a year later many of them returned as they want to be together as families and, in true British fashion, preferred this and the risks to be bullied by Mr. Hitler. I was fortunate but many children had unhappy times being used as cheap labour at the places they ended up in.

First I left my home town, Liverpool, at three and a half and went off to my Grandmother Marian and Aunt Jean in Bath. It must have been very difficult for them and particularly Jean to be suddenly landed with my sister Anne and myself. I was devastated to leave my mother. I was very unhappy there and this showed in a series of tantrums which I have slight memories of. These, I think, were the start of my rages which are sometimes just a flare-up but occasionally have been huge.

My grandmother had had a job teaching in France and so spoke fluent French. After the war in Ethiopia the Emperor, Haile Selassie, "King of Judah" and the messiah to the Rastafarian movement, was exiled to Bath. As my grandmother spoke French she was invited several times to tea with the Emperor and, allegedly, I played with his grandchildren. This gave me some kudos years later when I met a white Rastafarian who claimed that his coat-of arms was on the cover of "Holy Blood, Holy Grail" !

The adjacent dock town of Bristol was being bombed and it became apparent that the accuracy was not terrific; any spare bombs were being dropped on the public at random. So, my parents decided to send me off to somewhere safer and I went to the Lake District, which is a lovely part of England.

In many ways I was fortunate to go to Huyton Hill Preparatory School with the Headmaster Hubert Butler known as “Butty”. The school had about sixty boys and had been evacuated from Liverpool because of the bombing. My parents thought it would be all right for me to be there as my elder brother was there. In fact, I hardly saw him, and have not found out if it was a school policy, as I was told later, that it would be bad for me to see him or if he did not want to see me. Probably, like most things, a mixture of both.

I had such a miserable time when I first got there. Frequently, I had ear-ache and Mrs Blake, Butty’s sister-in law, was very kind and would pour warm oil into my ear to try to help but I remember many nights crying myself to sleep.

Butty had bought this large mock-Tudor house at the northern end of Lake Windermere, an idyllic setting with large grounds. The school was divided into two Houses, Arthur and Alfred, named after the Kings. It was better to be in romantic Arthur Rather than in Alfred who one only knew as a King who got into difficulty and burnt some cakes. We were strongly brought up on King Arthur’s legends and ideas of chivalry. The school motto “I Will with a Good Will” was based on what Arthur said when asked to go to collect the sword in the stone for his guardian’s son.

We were quite a long way, for little legs, from the nearest church which was by Wray Castle famous for being the place where Beatrix Potter started writing and sketching as a child. The Vicar was splendid, a member of the Kemble acting family who appeared dressed in his breeches ready for shooting. He preached with wonderful certainty and gusto.

Our other influence was the Guards. Each morning and evening we would raise and lower the St.George’s flag to “ _____ “ i.e. four notes high, four notes lower, three notes high followed by a long note all played on a bugle. I can hear it clearly as I write. This is the Morse code for the school’s initials HHS. It was fun learning to play the bugle and then the valveless trumpet.

The garden was set out in quiet a formal way which could be used as a stage with a large lawn in front for the audience . This was used for productions. The Houses rotated the week’s jobs and come Sunday there was “Changing of the Houses” on this stage.

This was a ceremony in which the ritual staff was passed from the House on duty to the other. The music was Elgar’s “Pomp and Circumstance”, I think Number 4, which sounded out over the Lake as we slow and quick marched to it. The last phrases are haunting and I remember clearly standing to attention looking at the bracken covered hills across the Lake and feeling a sense of Empire and belonging. Remember I was being trained to be part of an Empire which covered the world and on which the Sun never set. Ironically we did not realise that it was being lost at the same time.

There were productions for Parent’s Day. It was such a dramatic setting. We did all kinds of events. I remember being dressed up as a girl for one and it took ages for my parents to recognize me.

But all was not always roses. At lunch we were played music. In those days it was one side of a “ 78 “ record during each course. These were announced by one of the boys. At my turn Nita, Butty’s wife, shamed me in front of the whole school by deriding my Liverpool accent. I am not sure I had one although I have always found the first number difficult. It comes out as “wan’. This did nothing to help my confidence which has and had always been a problem.

I did try to learn the piano but this was not a success. The visiting teacher managed to teach me two bars of a tune while he groped my leg and told me what a good musician my brother was. I gave up after a month. On the other hand I remember one incident which, thank goodness, did not have a serious outcome. I got into a fight in the dining room and was overcome by a violent rage to the extent of picking up a knife from the table. Fortunately the other boys separated us but where had the rage come from? Was it the result of trying for so long to fit in places that I did not want to be?

Things happen that seriously affect you. Nita was quite a lady. Their apartment was close to our dormitory so when we made a rumpus she heard. One night we were making a big noise and she came roaring down the corridor. We were told to kneel on our beds, with our pyjama bottoms down, as she went round the room spanking us all. Incidents like this are probably one cause of the “English Vice” as the French say.

A little older and another dormitory which was on the way the staff had to use to go to the bathroom. We would wait in excited anticipation for Miss Jones to pass in her green satin dressing gown!! Oh, the excitements on the way to puberty and the embarrassment of your voice breaking.

But on the other hand we were well fed and it was incredible that Nita managed this with the severe rationing that was in place. It was three years after the war ended that I first met a banana. Some while ago I asked my older brother and sister what they remembered most about the war and their main memory was being hungry, I was lucky being small with a smaller tummy.

The standard of teaching was OK but not inspiring. We are so lucky when we meet good teachers whose enthusiasm lets us learn. We had for one term a Mr Stewart who was waiting to go to University after a serious operation. He inspired with geometry and algebra and we lapped it up working away at all hours. On the other hand we had a Mr Hales who tried to teach us English. He always complained that I frowned particularly when it got to parsing a sentence. Does anyone do this anymore? When I complained that I did not understand a word of what he was saying, he told me that I was only fit to be a “lounge lizard “. This was not a profession I had considered but later Graham Bigg and I tried our best at Loughborough with our Harry Hall trousers and Moss Bros suede jodhpur boots.

Hubert Butler was a very good Headmaster and I learnt many things from him that have stood me in good stead. Firstly, he had confidence in you and your ability to deal with the tasks he set. Reflecting I realise that I have no memory of any punishment at the school. We had a points system and so were on a scale of behaviour and we must have had some

minor rewards but all is forgotten. However, what is important is that whatever the system it worked and we learnt discipline. We had to keep ourselves and our possessions in order, make our beds, clean our shoes, brush our hair.

Butty was a pilot in the First World War. The conditions in the trenches were horrific. Sometimes you would not know if you were walking through the mud or on the remains of you dead companions who had been blown apart. Sebastian Faulk's book "Birdsong" is really helpful to understand a little of how it was during and after this war.

Butty, as part of his emphasis on discipline told the story of how a Guards regiment coming to the trenches shaved every day so keeping their, and their comrades, morale up. This training has helped me realise that discipline, next to love, is the key to happiness. Buying into the cheap instantaneous thrill is a waste of energy. I cannot imagine why we do it!

Due to my respect for Jefferson we recently had a trip to Monticello, his house that took him forty years to put together. He was hugely influenced by Palladio and the house initially appears like a copy of Chiswick House in London. Chiswick was built from drawings bought from Palladio as a place for the owner to exhibit his collection and did not have a kitchen added for some hundred years. Jefferson made a similar house which appears surrounded by a lawn and wooden terraces, He was a practical man and he used these terraces to collect water, the house being on top of a hill. Below lawn level are undercrofts that hide the house slave's quarters, stables and carriages, the kitchen and storage rooms. I loved the weights to his pendulum clock which he wanted to show the days of the week as they descended. Unfortunately he did not have enough height so if you want to know if it is Saturday or Sunday you have to go into the basement. We travelled from there to Annapolis, where the Navy Yard is the American centre for training naval officers. I was so shocked to see the cadets with their crumpled uniform slouching along the streets with their hands in their pockets. They would not have got away with that at either of my boarding schools.

Butty arranged trips. We would get on our bicycles and cycle off to the foot of another hill for another walk. If you walk in the Lakes there is always a hill involved. Climbing and walking for a whole or half day in the most wonderful landscapes which is both intimate and large. The constantly changing light on the rocks and grass has given me the basis for many years of joyful walking. It was the intention that we should have climbed all the hills and done all the traditional walks by the time we left the School.

We did much gardening and estate work. We were the labour to keep the grounds in order. We learnt how to pull a great deal of willow herb which was considered to be a weed and grew vigorously, how to dig a plot of ground, how to feed chickens and how to saw a great deal of wood for logs. We used to spend hours collecting rose hips as part of our war effort. These were turned into Rose Hip syrup which was meant to be nutritional. It was only recently that I found that the School got paid for these!! When we had free time we could play in the woods, climb high trees and make dams on a small stream. One of our excitements was watching sea-planes taking off and landing on the lake as they came and went from the well-hidden and secret factory where they were made.

I am writing this in a break from gardening at our house in Puerto Rico and whilst pottering along I have been enjoying reflecting on Butty. What more could little boys have wanted except Mummy ?

Eventually, aged thirteen, I took my Entrance exam to Bootham a Quaker School in York. The only thing I was good at was General Knowledge as I loved and love information. Unfortunately there was no exam in this so I failed every exam, excelling myself by only getting 15% in Latin. Fortunately I was able to get in as it was rather a family affair.

On my father's side, as I have said, I come from two Quaker families. The Malcomsons were mainly in Ireland. First in the south were they built a mill town, Portlaw, and when their firm fell apart due to backing the south in the American Civil War to, allegedly, the tune of GBP 1,000,000 my great grandfather started a Department Store in Belfast. Some members of the family did spend time in Liverpool and, eventually, my grandfather set up a business there with two of his brothers. Natives of Liverpool call it the capital of Wales and Ireland as they both have large populations there. My father remembered the Orange day marches and the bricks being hurled from Catholic to Protestant obviously demonstrating their religion of love.

My grandmother came from the Ransome family who had the large firm in Norwich famous first for inventing a more effective plough and then manufacturing aeroplane engines. This family had originally come from Manchester and that branch included the connection to Arthur Ransome.

Due to this many of my relations had been to Bootham including my grandfather and several of his brothers, my father and my uncle who had been the, then current, Headmaster's best man. Could this have been the reason that I was accepted even with those dreadful exam results ?!!

These exams happened some six weeks before the end of my last term and Butty treated me so well. I was allowed to sit in his study and read any books I chose. He really treated me as a grown-up. I had had difficulty learning to read but once I learnt I immediately fell in love with books which is why I have responded to a project in Philadelphia , Tree Top, which gives children a safe place to go after school surrounded by books and people to listen and encourage them to read.

These last few weeks were the first time I felt safe at the school after nine years, going so early I had responded by trying to keep my head down and survive. This certainly made me feel an outsider who did not belong and was uncomfortable with himself. The next time I felt safe was after I had picked up my first drink.

Water

I cannot remember how young I was, probably three, when my mother used to take me off to a local hotel which had a deep swimming pool, tie a rope around me as I could not swim, and I would just jump into the deep end. Then, when I wanted to come up I would tug on the rope!! It is obvious that I loved water from a very early age.

Prep school reinforced this love. We had the choice each morning of swimming in the lake or have a cold bath. What would you have chosen?

It's November the eleventh, you are running stark naked except for a very small towel and shoes to jump into Lake Windermere. You dive in. The water is cold but is not uncomfortable. You get out and stand on the wooden pier to dry. Your feet stick to the quarter of an inch of frost!! You feel great but also relieved that it is the end of the Lake swimming for the year.

The Headmaster (known as "Butty") was, on reflection, amazing and he would always come swimming with us. All this was during World War Two when we were being trained to run an Empire.

Water was a large part of our life there. Distantly related to Arthur Ransome it was fun that the School boathouse was used as an illustration in his book "Swallows and Amazons" which takes place on Lake Windermere. Also, in this book he illustrates "Cormorant Island" which is about five hundred yards from the wooden School pier.

I used to spend time alone as I liked some solitude. It was quite by the boathouse and one evening I was there by myself. Just past the boathouse was a promontory on which stood a beautiful Douglas fir tree surrounded by rushes. I am still as a heron fishes not breaking the silence. The memory is so clear that I think it was my first moment of "self-remembering" as described in the Work. I used this event for my first poem which ended "I, the pine and the heron are one". I wrote this poem at Bootham with encouragement from Rider Salmon. It was a first poem that led to many more.

Butty was very keen that we achieved things whilst we were there like climbing the Lake District hills which sometimes involved long bike rides. He taught us never to drink from the crystal clear mountain streams as there was usually a dead sheep upstream. He taught us much related to physical activities but all the time we were being introduced to the beauty and rules of the countryside. Almost by osmosis we met the cry of a curlew on the faded grass moor and the delight of the song of the ascending lark.

He encouraged us to swim to "Cormorant Island", accompanied by two of us who had learnt to row the large school rowing boat, and to take our Lifesaving exams. I still have my Bronze medal. Much of our lives were taken up with the lake and its sheer beauty surrounded by the brackened hills has remained with me.

Swimming has been a constant pleasure in my life and I swim nearly every day. In fact, most holidays have swimming built into them particularly in the open. Walking down the

steep path to the beach in Skyros, going for a long swim in a choppy sea, sleeping and awakening surrounded by a group of friends, also naked, was such a joy during the many holidays I had there. One day standing just near the group a man came to me and said “I do not speak English very well but could I play with you?” Sometimes I am a bit slow, nor was I wearing my glasses, and could not understand why the whole group were doubled over in laughter. When I asked they pointed out that the guy had a large erection!

Of course some pretty strange things can happen when swimming, particularly when alone. Once in Skyros I went for my long swim at a time when the beach was deserted, I came out to find that someone had put their towel too near to mine. A guy came and lay on it and what do you do? Do you say “excuse me but could you move a bit further away” or what?? Anyway we started to chat, gave brief life histories, he a priest who had left to go into business and I an early Prep-School boy. Eventually he said “You know Chris that when you went to school you ducked below the trench and you have not come up since “. He was very perceptive.

Some years later I was in Ithaca. What a magic island which I traveled all over on a small motorbike which I rode much too rashly. On the rough tracks you have to learn to accelerate when the bike becomes unstable which is scary. I spent hours at the alleged home of Odysseus watercolouring and being still. It could easily be the right site with its commanding, but gentle, view of the sea in two directions over fertile fields.

But sometimes you need more excitement so off I go on the ferry to Lefkada which had just had an earthquake of 6.4 on the Richter Scale. This did not mean too much to me but I had heard that the Greek Government were giving GBP 20 Million (a lot of money) to repair the roads. Well, they were bad. There were great tears in the tarmac, and then I met a heap of debris about ten feet high blocking the way. A lorry had been over it so up I went. The back wheel started to spin, the dust got thicker and thicker and then the whole lot began to move but luckily I had just managed to get over the top. I now realized that riding around an island on a small motorbike was risky particularly when you looked up and saw massive boulders that had not quite fallen. However, onward and ready for a swim I found a road, albeit taped across as closed, which went down steeply to a beach.

There were stones on the road but the bike could wiggle between them. At the bottom there was a wonderful deserted beach with the sea lying between massive sun soaked rocks. The only strange, but predictable, thing being a stack of deck chairs. So, stripping off completely I have this lovely swim washing off the debris’ dust. I start to swim in and I see this slightly strange man on this deserted beach. There is no one around but him. I get out, start to dress, he talks to me in Greek; I see his strangeness is because he is massively built but a dwarf. I cannot understand him then he grabs me with huge strength. I am much taller than he but I have to struggle to get myself loose. I am scared as it is so isolated, run for the bike and escape only to find I took a wrong turn and had to turn around to make it to freedom.

There were many holidays spent camping by the River Wye in Herefordshire both as a child and as a parent. The shivery swim before breakfast. The warmer swim before lunch. Canoeing silently downstream without disturbing the wildlife and being rewarded by the

blue flash of a kingfisher. But I think the best swim I have ever had, partially because it was so unexpected, was in the Yuba river near Nevada City in California. This river comes down from the Sierra Nevada and is such a raging torrent as the snow melts that the rocks are polished. These rocks are huge, thirty feet spheres rounded by the water. We were there in the summer just before I performed a wedding service in Monterey. The raging torrent had become a gentle stream but with cold twenty foot deep pools. There were maybe fifteen people there scattered about on the rocks with such an air of community as we dived into the pools or swam upstream through a very narrow triangular opening between the boulders. There was a magic quality in the air. One of the people approached us and said he would e-mail the photo of Virginia and I kissing in one of the pools. He did. What a wonderful time.

I write this after my morning swim in Puerto Rico where we are so fortunate to have a house close by the sea. It seems a long journey from the frosted pier in the Lake District to a little bay in the Caribbean. There are many places with wonderfully clear seas.

Diving into this clarity from a rock or a boat is an act of purity. When you visit a sacred site in Greece, Delos, Delphi, Olympia, there is always the washing place for purification and swimming seems to give another dimension to the day. The skin and energy feel so well and different.