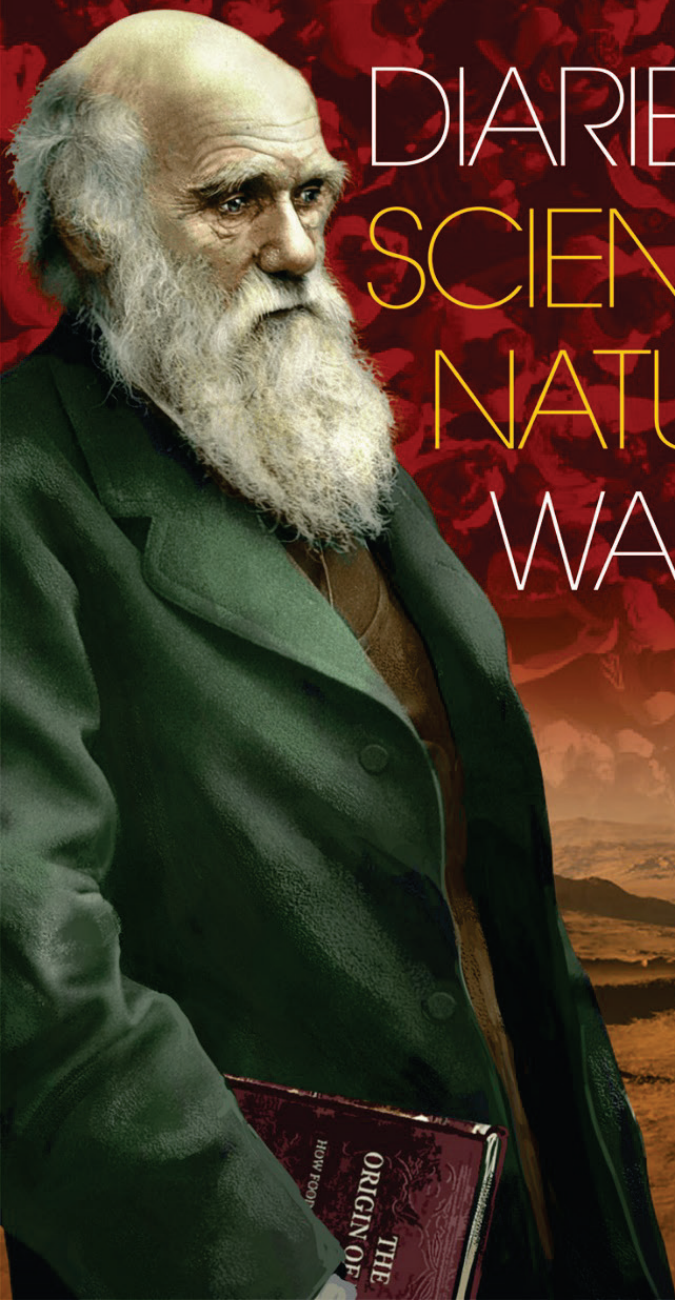


ICS BOOKS

THE BEST OF 25 YEARS OF **THE SCOTTISH REVIEW** **ISSUE 9**

DIARIES
SCIENCE AND
NATURE
WAR



The Best of 25 Years of the Scottish Review

Issue 9

Diaries
Science and Nature
War

Edited by
Islay McLeod

ICS Books

To

*Kenneth Roy, founder of the Scottish Review, mentor and friend,
and to all the other contributors who are no longer with us.*

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DIARY EXTRACTS

A terrible normality

Alison Prince

1995

Friday 27 January

Bosnia hadn't gone quiet at all, the press had just got bored with it. The siege of Sarajevo has been going on for 1,000 days. Bizarrely, from that city where people subsist on 'something like dog food' provided by the UN as the rockets fall, some manage to send nonchalant emails to such people as Clancy Sigal, whose *Guardian* account conveyed, not the drama, but the awful normality of the thing.

Saturday 28 January

There has been, too, the commemoration of what was, for many, the most terrible normality in the world. Ever since I read Primo Levi's *If This Is A Man*, the daily routine at Auschwitz-Birkenau has seemed hideously real. It's the small things that stick in the mind. The guard said quietly in the pre-dawn morning only 'Wstavac'. Get up. He knew, Levi said, that the end of the night's frail warmth and safety was a moment of acute pain.

Up in the glen this morning, in a white frost less keen than that of Poland, the usual robin came to my hand and pecked up four currants. If this is life, I'm grateful.

Tuesday 31 January

I spent a merry hour talking to some 200 pupils at Arran High School about gender stereotyping – whether it's true, as a group I've worked with in Glasgow had contended, that boys are expected by teachers and parents to behave worse than girls, whether boys are treated with less affection (they all thought they were), and whether any of us really wanted the male of the species to be tough and macho. (We all thought we didn't.)

It was a lively session, with a lot of opinion being expressed by all concerned. I ended it about three minutes before the bell for break, to give the teachers who were present time to tidy up any loose ends, and the multitude went rolling out – and rolled back in again like a wave hitting a sea wall, followed by the recently appointed headmaster. In the strangulated voice of the parade ground, he proceeded to tear a huge strip off everyone, staff included, standing very straight in a blue suit that made him look like a fountain pen. He then stalked out, recognising the presence of a visitor by not so much as the flicker of an eyebrow. I hate to fall into a gender stereotype here, but I've never encountered quite such a macho performance from a female heidie – or, to be fair, from many males. The irony wasn't lost on the kids, either. I rest my case, m'lud.

Friday 3 February

There was a heron standing in the garden this morning, perfectly still, at the burn's edge where it borders my unkempt grass. It looked very big, hunched under its backpack of folded wings. The school bus going over the bridge provoked no reaction, and even when I went out with the dogs for the morning walk, there was only a slight turn of the tufted head and a considered stare.

Heron is oddly magical, the grey-cloaked Merlin (as opposed to merlin) of the bird world. Unlike the rather squalid cormorants that stand on the rocks with their wet wings held out like washing, they are always poised and dignified. Seagulls hate it when a heron chooses to stand on their foreshore, but all the screaming and divebombing produces no more than a careful ducking of the head. The contemplation of the horizon, or whatever it is, remains undisturbed. I'm a great admirer of herons. I think about them sometimes in committee meetings, when all else fails.

Scotland: a house in ruins

Angus Peter Campbell

1995

Monday 10 July

Visit my mother in her sheltered house in Daliburgh. Cosy wee hoose. Plates of soup. Cups of tea. Scones. Was it for this the clay grew tall? My wife's granny lives in another sheltered house 300 miles away in Gorgie. Now 92, she remembers her own granny, born just two years after Napoleon died in his sheltered house in St Helena.

The Gorgie granny is rich in recollections of her Dundee childhood. Her father, blacklegged in the Dundee jute mills for speaking back to a gaffer, was forced to move out of the city to find work. Each Saturday, he cycled back to Dundee to visit his mother. One Saturday morning, he was stopped by the polis: the King and Queen were visiting the city, and no-one was allowed in until the royal carriage passed by. Standing for an hour in his sweat-soaked shirt, he caught a chill and died a couple of years later of bronchial complications, aged 42. The story, like a million others, is told without anger or political comment. Scottish women, like not a few Scottish men, have been well-conditioned to be emotional minimalists.

Continue to visit relatives' houses, whaur extremes meet: they are either in ruins, or brand new, with huge satellite extensions. Like any good Highlander, I prefer the ruined ones. Every empty cottage I've looked into has an old bedspring propped in the corner of the oh-so-tiny rooms. How small the houses were, how great the poverty. So this is Scotland: a house in ruins, with an old bedspring in the corner.

The radio announces that *The Scotsman* is for sale, bedspring and all.

Tuesday 11 July

Day on Garrynamonie beach. Miles and miles of sand. No booking of deckchairs. No ice-cream. No Cinzanos. Flies. The children rush in and out of the Atlantic, and we take pictures to remember it by.

Observe peat cutting – think I should feel the timelessness of it, but mostly feel the very opposite – how the young men (and it was always men) who drove the tractors when I was a wee boy, are now bald, or white-haired. Fewer do it, and the young do it out of filial duty, not out of need. So that, like all things that depend on a sense of duty, it will ultimately die away.

In the late evening, Colin Bell discusses Cuba, where much the same problem appears to exist.

After days and days of sunshine, a thunderstorm breaks from the north.

Wednesday 12 July

Spend the day hauling peat sacks on my back for my brother in Smerclate. Reminds me of the Skye ferry. When you stood, in January, in lashing rain, waiting for the ferry, the idea of a bridge seemed the most sensible thing on earth. What do these summer speed bonny boat tourists ken about it. At this moment, peat sack on back, eaten by flies, the idea of coal or gas or oil-fired central heating seems eminently sensible. Lyndsay reminds me that the thing she remembers most about her last pregnancy was lying in waiting in Raigmore watching an ad for central heating on the telly. She remembers, in between contractions, seeing the image of a man hewing coal at the face, and then a gleaming Hoover shimmering across a show house. It was the first time it really struck her that men had died, and continue to die, so that we can Hoover our houses. On the radio, Raymond Briggs reminds us that men died for even less in the Falklands. Bags it for me, the Iron Lady screamed at the Tin Man, who wanted to bags it for himself.

Thursday 13 July

Meet a man named Peter John on the road. Once one of the finest athletes I knew, he is paunched and haggard, old before his time, and unemployed. He has nothing to do except walk endlessly between his council house and the shop, for a stamp or a pen or an envelope or a box of matches, or any tiny thing that will keep him in touch with an external world.

Social dislocation is not just confined to the sorry victims of Hanger 13. This Gaelic society, that is increasingly asked to pride itself on its sense of cultural and linguistic identity, shows tremendous casualties: it seems to me that, as in the rest of Scotland, the common people are suffering greatly whilst development schemes of all sorts and kinds emerge at every corner. Does anyone really believe that workshops can heal a broken people? It is, of course, just like the Balkans, where all the world's gathered wisdom is like a spit in the wind against emotions that have been suppressed for centuries. As I speak to Peter John, I know one thing: we all fail to love sufficiently. It will be the death of us yet.

Friday 14 July

Watch the telly news for the first time in months. Shaven refugees file past the cameras in Bosnia. They remind me of Peter John. Mr and Mrs Hopping Mad in Middle England phone John Cole about it.

I glance at the hundreds of books that my brothers and sisters and I gathered when we were students, and which we've left, like the debris from a shipwreck, about the family home. Marx and Joyce and Engels lean into my brother's engineering manuals which lean into my other brother's theological treatises which lean into one sister's nursing volumes and the other's *Elementary Introduction to Algebra*. Someone smuggled Jeffrey Archer into the house, and he still lies there, unopened, next to *Being and Nothingness*, next to the *Scots Magazine*.

Saturday 15 July

The children awake all last night. We all sleepwalk all day.

Sunday 16 July

Visit dad's grave. Next to the cemetery, a sign says '3,000-year-old house'. We walk towards it, but never reach it because my brother and his wife and children meet up with us on the way back from it, and persuade us that it is not worthwhile taking the long trek through the sand dunes to see the ancient site. 'It's just a heap of stones,' my sister-in-law says, so we all obediently walk back to our cars and on to the ice-cream shop and the beach.

Moaning Gaels

Tom Morton

1995

Monday 2 October

Brutally tiring day. Up at 6am, write script, do show. Then pack meagre possessions, mostly books, as I'm moving my mainland place of residence to Nairn. The petty twisted crapulence of Inverness – all supermarkets, do-nothing factory units, tartan tat and that whiny Cromwellian accent – finally grew too much. A Highland university, a proper one, complete with campus, might provide something soulful to fill the Presbyterian vacuum at the heart of Dolphinsludge. The much-vaunted computer-linked collegiate 'University of the Highlands', is set to fail while allowing the Supergaels to establish an academic power base at Sabhal Mor Ostaig on Skye, where they will continue to create a mythology of how their language, culture, history, fish and land were ripped away from them, ochone, ochone.

Come with me to the headlands of Ronas Voe, braithrin, where I will show you cleared croft after cleared croft, where still abide a people without the terminal disease of religious self-disgust, who outfished, out-thought, out-worked and out-dealt the lairds and history to win whinge-free dignity. The way the Gaels have been allowed to rewrite Scotland's history is ridiculous. One more moaning poem about generations of lost ancestors and I swear I'll throw up. Ah, to be back in Shetland.

Unpack, partially, write *Scotsman* column, a rant about computers, file, eat some hummus and sleep the sleep of the about to get up again far too soon.

Tuesday 3 October

Go for chips just after the O J Simpson verdict, to be met by a woman behind the counter, absolutely bursting to tell me that O J's been let off. 'I don't think he did it,' she says over the salt and vinegar. Tony Blair's hollow booming at Brighton – supposedly the greatest speech Jim Callaghan has ever heard – gets top billing on *Nine O'Clock News*, somehow. A laptop computer for every schoolchild, Tony promises. Surfing the pixillated zeitgeist, seduced by the great computer lie like everyone else, or at least mouthing the platitudes.

Wednesday 4 October

Hattersley, the darling of the left, suddenly. Roy appears like some curious species of wild animal, snorting and bellowing while the bland suits (even Prescott now in Hugo Boss) graze greedily on their sweet conceit. The Lib Dems now have a more radical education policy than Labour.

Walk to the harbour. A south-easterly, maybe force 6, is rattling and clanging and

shrieking through the rigging of dozens of yachts in the marina. It's strangely uplifting, orchestral in the darkness, as the amusement arcades glare the last neon of the season out over the Moray Firth. It's a land-nurtured wind though, smelling of earth, smoke and whisky.

Thursday 5 October

End of the radio week. Normally I'd be training-and-planing it back to Shetland, but business calls in Glasgow, so I'm not going home. The weekly travelling for the sake of the programme isn't sustainable in the long-term. Or is it? A furious row this week with senior producer Jeff had me telling Susan to call ace builder Herbie, who says he can convert our barn into Britain's most northerly bookshop. The eternal caution of wives persuaded me not to act rashly. Maybe I'm not cut out for retail, anyway.

Friday 6 October

Seamus Heaney awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. I heard him read once, in Orkney, and while his presence and charm were enormous, I was left half-warmed by the work. I've read a lot of his poetry since, and it still lumbers too much for me. R S Thomas on the other hand – the savagery and religious weirdness at the heart of his still-rural world – appeals far more. He's rough, hill-distilled spirit to Heaney's warm soda bread.

A cold doorstep

Ronald Mavor

1996

Wednesday 24 April

My first Meeting of Council of the Philosophical. Too long and too boring. The only important question, not discussed, is whether, approaching its bicentenary, that notable old Society is past its 'sell-by' date or if, and how it might become 'born again'.

Monday 29 April

To the ophthalmologist. I have always hated games and was bored stiff in half an hour trying to arrange colours between blue and yellow, but quite liked spotting how many lights there were in my visual fields. My approaching blindness of a year ago has gone away. Kenneth McKellar reminded me of the old senate who, told he would go blind if he didn't give up whisky, considered, and said: 'Well, doctor, I think maybe I've seen enough already'.

To see Ian McKellen's film of *Richard III*. Very wild, very funny, and a towering performance from Ian. Also brilliantly scripted by I McK and Mr W S. The iambic pentameter first appears after 10 minutes of action, and 'Now is the Winter of our discontent' is delivered at a Royal Ball and to Edward, 'this Sun of York.' The ending, too, wonderfully cheats the audience into saying, 'Oh, come on. This is getting too much like a bloody gangster movie', and then mocks us by indicating that that is precisely what Shakespeare wrote.

Tuesday 30 April

Nice birthday lunch chez James Cairncross in Edinburgh for Elspeth Cochrane, who was my theatrical agent, was the first stage manager at the Citizens, in the Athenaeum (1943) and also the Stratford Festival Theatre in Ontario (1953). Still running her agency and a unique source of gossip which the theatre lives on as a whale lives on plankton. Also, much chat about 'the old days' of Roddy McMillan, John Duncan Macrae, Gibbie, Fulton Mackay – only Andy Keir still acting of that great pre-Havergal generation at the Citizens Theatre.

Glasgow taxi driver says they've been told by the police that in six or seven years only taxis and public transport will be permitted in the city centre. I'm all for that. Why do more people not realise that buying a new car means you throw away some £3,000–£4,000 on depreciation? That's 1,000 taxis. And you don't have to worry about insurance, batteries, tyres... And a taxi takes you where you want to go. You don't spend half an hour finding a parking space (at a cost) a mile from your destination. And you get lively conversation. I would ban parked cars from residential streets. Well, Hyndland anyway. They seem to say, 'This is my little fortified space, even if I've left it in *your* street. It's locked and demobilised;

and it will scream if you, or a passing cat, touch it'. Falkland Street, old sepia photos show, was much nicer when children and dogs played outside the front doors and only a single horse-cab might wander round the corner.

Wednesday 1 May

Cold, damp and grey. Why did I come back to this cold doorstep of a country? For a dozen years in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, even the seven-month, cold (-30 degrees) winter had the sun beating down on the permafrost; and on the 7th of April the snow vanished, the temperature rose into the 70s, 80s, 90s and you could plan a barbecue weeks ahead and be all but certain it wouldn't rain.

Reading Catherine Carswell. An old Montrose woman said to her: 'Auld age disna come its lane. Gin it bring naething else it brings *sweirdness*'. Delighted to be reminded of that lovely word; meaning 'reluctant, slow, lazy'. Confess I am aft gey sweert myself in this climate.

Friday 3 May

The Tory Party, described yesterday as 'cheerfully pessimistic' (a neat oxymoron), have lost 567 local government seats and are trying to persuade the public that this is a sign – as they didn't lose even more – that everything is going according to plan. Please may they be kicked out soon, before they do more damage at home and abroad.

Sunday 5 May

My lawyer, approaching retirement, took up the cello a couple of years ago: so I suggested we play Haydn Trios – which experienced cellists hate because they have so little to do. But too fast for us, though we have a good pianist who rattles through them. Have taken to salon pieces by Elgar and Granados. Much better (tho' still, to the outside ear, I'm sure bloody awful). But we are beginning to listen to each other. I roasted a chicken for dinner, a great success. I was even complimented on my bread sauce, although I toasted the bread and fried the onions, which is not gastronomically correct, and was not intended.

Wednesday 8 May

I had to work hard on Sunday to make myself heard. A friend had pointed out that the top of my fiddle was coming unstuck. Took it to the fiddle-maker. There is also a long crack on the belly, so it will cost £100 pounds to repair. The fiddle belonged to my grandfather and is 110 years old. Shall I play like Perleman when it is repaired? No.

Called on Cliff Hanley, getting a wee thing auld but in excellent spirits. He is to get an Oscar at the Film Theatre next week for *Seawards the Great Ships* which has been cheered up and reprinted. Also, someone is writing his biography. 'Well, if it amuses him: I have the time.'

Friday 10 May

To dinner in the Glasgow Art Club for William Crosbie, painting better than ever. When I first joined the Art Club in 1948, Bill and David Donaldson were, as they still are in their 80s, the two best painters in the West of Scotland. I'm very disappointed in their acolytes. When I came back from Canada, I immediately rejoined the Club but didn't feel at home, as I did when the great Jennie Law ran it and, of an evening, you could drop in and have splendid, if not always altogether sober, conversations round the (now hideously stained and peeling) light oak octagonal tables in the Gallery. I went in once or twice recently and one of the girls was reading a novel in front of the fire. I'm seldom down town when the Club is busy at lunchtime, so I resigned. I shall not miss their exhibitions. The Crosbies showed how fine the Gallery looks with good paintings on the walls.

Thursday 17 May

M Chirac and Chancellor Kohl have both gallantly eaten British beef (though the Euroexperts have decline to raise the ban). Quite right, too, all of them. Old people ought to keep the farmers and butchers in business. If Chirac or Kohl had brought a couple of children with them, would they have eaten, or been offered, the same fodder?

We may be on the verge of an epidemic of a new form of Creutzfeld Jakob's disease which seems to be related to mad cow disease. Sure, it's not yet proven. But a cholera epidemic was halted in London by 'removing the handle of the Broad Street pump', demonstrating that you don't *have* to wait for final proof to behave sensibly. This is a major question about our children's health, and a question for rational scientific study. Europhobia should have no part in the debate. (And, anyway, the nice Americans and New Zealanders banned our beef six years ago.)

Odd, then, that *our* veterinarians (and the French because we stood alone in supporting their atom bomb tests in the South Pacific) are quite sure the beef is safe, while others are not. The French have just had their 19th case of BSE and slaughtered (as we used to do for foot and mouth) the whole herd of 62 beasts. We have had, what? 162,000 cases and done virtually nothing. So much for the sloppy, careless foreigners.

Saturday 19 May

To the GFT, umquhile Cosmo Cinema, to honour the late George Singleton. Born on the morning of 1 January 1900, he rather wanted to see the new millennium, but missed it by five years. Ah, the French and Russian movies we saw on grey afternoons at the Cosmo. George insisted that he didn't do it for the public, or for culture; he did it for the Singletons. But that was the most acceptable face of capitalism: now long absurd, alas.

Tuesday 21 May

Mr Major has declared war on the European Union. Well, the Falklands War won Mad Meg loadsa votes. But, madness. Madness.

Tuesday 28 May

To the Maly Theatre at the Tramway. *Claustrophobia* didn't enchant me as much as their earlier *Guadeamus* but it is an extraordinary company of young, athletic, talented people who have rehearsed for months. Must say, I prefer theatre to be written by playwrights. Brilliant improvisations in the rehearsal room don't always stand up to perpetual repetition. 'He who binds to himself a joy/ Does the winged life destroy;/ But he who kisses the joy as it flies/ Lives in eternity's sunrise.' And the contemporary Russian satire was largely lost on me, though not on my young companions. I felt it was like watching *Have I Got News For You* in Chinese in the Beijing version.

Friday 31 May

Douglas Young said, quoting one of his ancient Greeks, that you should always end on an up-beat. So... The sun is shining, if a little bleakly. There is almost enough blue in the sky to make a pair of breeks for a hielandman. If the June solstice comes, can spring be far behind?

In and out of court

Ian Hamilton

1996

Thursday 1 August: Murder

Most of my working life is murder. People turn in buses when they hear us say, 'I'm doing a murder next week'. It means we're engaged in the prosecution or defence of someone charged with murder. Some people think the first suspect in a murder is a member of the victim's family. Wrong! The usual murder is a sudden flurry on a pavement salted with oaths and cries. 'Here's the polis', goes up the shout and everyone runs away except one, a moment ago a fighter, now still and silent. It's only chance that decides whether you end up in the dock or on the mortuary slab.

Other people think murder is glamorous. Wrong again. It's sordid and tragic. No-one wins a murder case. All society loses it. Yet the able prosecution and the able defence of serious crime is one of the badges of a civilised country. Read your Bible. The first story in it is about sex; the next about murder. The tabloids haven't got the public interest wrong. These things are elemental. A bit further on in the Bible you get a child custody case. It was heard by King Solomon himself. He thought chopping up the wean was a reasonable compromise. All His Majesty proved is the need for an appeal court. There's a judge like Solomon in every court in the country.

Friday 2 August: Murder

This is the second week of this case and on it goes.

'How can you defend someone you know in your heart to be guilty?' we are asked. No-one ever asks the other question, 'How can you prosecute someone you know in your heart to be innocent?' Whichever side we act for, we do our clinical best. We don't make up lies or stretch points. One thing perhaps you should know. All of us find it easier when the evidence is overwhelmingly against us. Even then we still fight with cold fury to have our client's story given full weight. But if such a case goes against us we shrug. What all of us are afraid of – judge, prosecution, defence – is a miscarriage of justice. In Scotland, there's no effective way to overturn a jury's verdict. Everyone knows there should be. But Scotland is the only jurisdiction in the world that doesn't have a legislature to monitor it. Think of that.

Monday 5 August: Murder (still it goes on)

We QCs swan in and out of court apparently untouched by tragedy. Don't be deceived. Our equanimity is a mask for misgiving. We are adrenalin junkies. Now and again the trial is held up, and people shake their heads at the law's delays, blaming the lawyers. Count the people involved, starting with 15 jurors, and you'll find that it takes the attendance of 40

people every day to keep the High Court turning. Any business employing 40 key staff would expect some absentees. We get them too, and they bring everything to a dead stop. I'm surprised that we make the speed we do. In Scotland, we get through in a day what would take an English court a week.

Scots lawyers are better educated, better trained and better lawyers than our English counterparts. I know because I've practised in two English jurisdictions. Such is the chip we Scots carry on our shoulder that any such comparison must be to our disadvantage or no-one will believe it. Anyway what the hell have jurors to complain about? Theirs is the only compulsory service in peacetime in a free society.

Monday 12 August: Still murder

People think that the job of a criminal QC is glamorous. Where do you think we go when we're not performing? I'm in a circuit town 150 miles from home. Of an evening, I lie on my bed reading a paperback. The mills of mind go over the day's work past, the day's work to come. Ach to hell! You've had enough of murder. So have I.

Monday 19 August

Yes my murder has finished. Yes he was convicted. I've done my best. He does his time.

On the road with Rangers

Kevin McCarra

1996

Sunday 1 December

Hugh Keevins of *The Scotsman* is with me on the drive back from Rangers' match at Aberdeen and I present him with the squat cigar given to me by the neighbours across the landing in the tenement, Thomas and Linda McCusker, when their second son, Jack, was born last week. I don't smoke, but if celebration by proxy is required Hugh will take care of it.

Back home at 8.30, I'm walking along the street in Dennistoun when a car nearly hits a man with a stick as he edges off the kerb. He starts to scold the driver, who gets out to continue the argument and is soon calling the near-victim 'a stupid old bastard'. A fight looks likely. In the end, it's probably only the embarrassment of attacking an old man with a stick that keeps the aggression verbal.

Monday 2 December

Off to the accountants with Hamish Whyte. Together we started the Mariscat Press, a puny publishing business, 14 years ago, and now it's time to close it down. We're both too busy to keep it going as it was, although Hamish will reconstitute the Press, without me, in an even smaller form. Every ending makes you melancholy and this one reminds me how much I've changed. I don't care too much about contemporary poetry any more. The tinsel and bustle of journalism suits me better nowadays.

Back in the flat, however, I pull out a copy of Edwin Morgan's *Sonnets from Scotland*, published by us in 1984, and grin at the thought of the many visits it took to prise the cover design out of Alasdair Gray. *The Glasgow Herald's* review of the book said that 'its only point of comparison in modern Scottish poetry is MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*'. I feel proud to have been involved with *Sonnets*.

In the evening, Susan and I go to the Quay, a new multiplex at Kinning Park, and see *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, a thriller in which Geena Davis plays an amnesiac mum who used to be a government assassin. It takes deep pockets to make a movie as shallow, and satisfying, as this. There was even some money left over for the script. 'Do me a favour,' Davis tells a lecherous and predictable drunk, 'every few minutes, make bubbles come out of your mouth and say *hic*'.

Tuesday 3 December

I'm with the rest of the press party in Auxerre to cover Rangers as they round off another bad year in the Champions League. This little town of 50,000 people in the Burgundy

region conforms to all your notions of provincial French life. There are winding streets, a hulking 13th-century church and shop window displays of guns.

Auxerre is giddy with the success of the team and the enthusiasm is untouched by the multi-national sponsors and their marketing skills. The posters for the game are so amateurish that you read them twice to make sure they aren't really advertising a village fete. The waitress in the cafe defies December as she wears the Auxerre strip, right down to the shorts and socks. On the window of the baker's there is a painting of Guy Roux, the club's manager for 35 years. It shows him dressed in a kilt and playing the bagpipes to the Loch Ness monster.

Roux looks like the kind of farmer who is a virtuoso of the EU subsidy, but his cunning has really been at the service of a club so small that it has no business being a success. Ignorance makes my admiration of him uncomplicated, but the French journalists feel that his power is unhealthy. One of them, aghast, tells me that the men in the tollbooth on the autoroute call him if they spot an Auxerre player setting off for the bright lights of Paris. I only laugh and think of Jock Stein. (Both teams are inept and Auxerre win 2-1.)

A meeting with Alex Salmond

Ian Mackenzie

1997

Easter Sunday

Resurrection of a sort. I leave civilisation to join my family in Galloway. Crossing the Ayrshire frontier with the blue Doon hills to the west, lochs twinkling ahead, and green spring everywhere, I hear on the car radio snatches of James MacMillan's new *Galloway Mass* premiered in Ayr. There's more to Scotland than politics, there's the raw energy of art and work, and the unsung resilience of most people's lives.

Over lunch, the Solway sparkling down the road, some human sparkle brightens the election. The day before, my family met not the image of a politician but a politician. It wasn't an advertised meeting, but they'd heard that he was due at the Dalbeattie car park before going walkabout and having lunch at the Maxwell Arms. As a small group of supporters waited in the car park, anxiety spread. He was late. What were they waiting for? A helicopter? A battle bus? The Espace arrived and parked. The figure at the back was on one of the three mobile phones that seemed to constitute the equipment. When he uncoiled himself and emerged beaming, my wife Elizabeth was surprised that he was so tall. She was not surprised by, but noted, his non-tweedy smart apparel and large brown eyes.

He strode across and engaged my mother-in-law, wife and son in animated conversation. Their verdict: vigour, intelligence, and warmth. My mother-in-law, Elizabeth Whitley, was in no doubt: Alex Salmond was the best leader the SNP had had. Such an assessment carries resonance: she was the SNP candidate who fought the Tory leader Alec Douglas-Home for Perth and Kinross; if you can fight anything as smooth as a bar of soap.

I asked why she rated Salmond so highly. 'Because he keeps his head when the insults are flying.' This also was born of experience; Douglas-Home, all gallantry when reporters and cameras were around, was at other times plain rude about 'That woman' who had dared challenge him. Well, he admitted his job was to see off home rule. What horrified her most was that people with tied houses were checked over when they voted. Clearly, she felt the bright-eyed Alex in the Dalbeattie car park would need to continue to keep his head.

The moon over Pennan

Donald Reid

1997

Friday 11 July

Alford-Strathdon-Rhynie, Dufftown

Along the Don in the sunshine there are fields of shiny wheat rippling with electric wave patterns. Farmers are tying up bundles of hay, their freckled sons watching squint-eyed from the seat of the tractor. There is idyll yet in this world. Liz Young, wearing her gardening hat in her exuberant walled garden at Candacraig in Strathdon, says to me: 'We'd like a few more visitors, but not *too* many'.

I was sitting having my lunch on a park bench in Lumsden when I realised there was a story about Rhynie on the front page of *The Herald*. It's quite a complicated business, but it's to do with the 400-million-year-old fossils they have found in Rhynie and what light those might shed on the current attempts to find life on Mars. Maybe if they can find life in Rhynie it's odds-on there's some on Mars.

Then, having driven to Ruthven, near Huntly, I stopped for a pint of (Real) Real Ale (you can never be sure these days) at the Borge Brew House, where we chatted about the pronunciations of place names in the north-east. Were I from Germany it would be no problem: the locals would chuckle fondly and put me right. As I am from the central belt, they look at me blankly, shake their heads and with poker face ask me to repeat myself. I said, I'm trying to make my way from Alford, over to the River Avon, up to Findochty, along to Crovie, and back down to the Chapel of Garioch.

Saturday 12 July

Speyside

Today I pretended I was a DVS (Discerning Visitor to Scotland) and went on a distillery tour at Glenfiddich. To my surprise our guide Roberta, a tall, attractive, dark-haired lass, spoke with an Italian accent. She was wearing a kilt, as was Gustav, taking the tour beside us, and Wilhelm of the thick Germanic tones. It was like Babel – or maybe Strasbourg – as they told us in cracked but perfectly adequate English all about low wines and feints and copper stills. Hands up who is horrified that the youthful furreners have got this far north and hands up who's delighted. Me, I'm for Roberta.

Sunday 13 July

Craigellachie-Elgin

In pur droukit-like Elgin my B&B hostess is happy to see me. I am less demanding than some of the other guidebook researchers. She tells me that the STB deducted points from

her Highly Commended rating because the chairs in her dining room didn't match. They told her she could make them up if she had leather menus. On such matters is the 'quality' of our tourist facilities assessed. Nice old place it was; the rooms have been done in standard pine but it's clean and it doesn't attack you with too much pink and air freshener. No leather menus, but.

Monday 14 July

Elgin-Cullen-Banff-Pennan

Most of the day I spent driving along winding coastal roads and through huddled fishing villages. You can tell it's the coast: there are empty harbours, painters on ladders, washing blowing in the wind, fighter jets and caravan parks where stoical types go for a holiday.

In Cullen, a village given Athenian grandeur by its disused railway viaduct, the STB has abandoned its gun position and left the local resistance to establish its own tourist information centre. It isn't very slick, but it gives you that warm feeling of endeavour and earnestness – the good, loyal type of earnestness, the type too often patronised.

After dinner in Pennan, the wee village where they filmed *Local Hero*, I walked out on the crooked finger wall of the small harbour and realised that of all Pennan I alone could see the moon, rising behind the cliff above the village. It takes a moment such as this to make me realise how many days have passed when I have failed to acknowledge the true companionship of nature. City dwellers, do you know the phase of the moon tonight? Does it wax or wane? When is high water? Might it rain tomorrow?

Referendum day

Edna Robertson

1997

Wednesday 10 September

Eve of Referendum. Fine time to run into Jim Turnbull, the cartoonist whose fearty Scottish lion had a crisis of nerves in 1979. We are at Emilio Coia's studio sale, where a lifetime's work of caricatures and portraits is to come under the hammer.

A poignant occasion. The saleroom crowd includes a number of Coia's friends and fellow members of Glasgow Art Club, where with his colourful ties and candid opinions he maintained a vivid presence to the end of his days. It's not long since he made an unscheduled speech at an exhibition opening, berating those present for not taking the time to look – really look – at the paintings. Another memory: Emilio (who lived just along the road from me in Dowanhill) pouring wine and musing about the uniqueness of human faces, the quality that makes each one instantly recognisable – still a source of wonder to him after a lifetime of drawing them.

Right at the end of the sale, after the better known literary and artistic representations, comes a job lot of political cartoons and caricatures. I enter the bidding hesitantly but am soon locked into an escalating battle. When the ceiling that I have mentally set myself is reached, I don't even consider withdrawing. Eventually there is a rap of the hammer and it seems that I am the owner of 100 political cartoons.

They make a striking gallery – a handful of Harold Wilsons, a minimalist Michael Foot, a wonderfully wicked Thatcher. A pre-war cartoon about Scottish nationalism, featuring Compton Mackenzie and Wendy Wood. Bygone by-elections – Jack House as Liberal candidate in Woodside in 1967. And one to pin-up on Referendum Day: John P Mackintosh.

Thursday 11 September

Vote at Hyndland Secondary School. An inert canvasser stands outside, but the school motto inscribed at the entrance carries a clear message – *spero meliora* ['I hope for better things'].

Two friends arrive for referendum day lunch. We are all double-yes voters but, this being Scotland, a harmonious lunch is by no means guaranteed. Over the mushroom stew we argue furiously about Princess Diana; the argument still rages over the pears baked in red wine. And this despite the fact that we are all paid-up republicans.

Tune into the results with some trepidation. Will Turnbull's lion dare to make the leap? Perhaps the only thing we have to fear is fearties.

Friday 12 September

I like the comment of the pundit on radio that this time it was the status quo that was the bogey. Lady Thatcher's visit, a godsend to the *yes* camp, was a reminder of what can happen. Her political demise, rather than creeping devolutionary doubts, was surely the main reason for the Scottish Conservatives' relatively good showing in the 1992 election. The experience of the 1980s was certainly one of the reasons why I for one voted yes with more conviction this time round. And would have voted with more enthusiasm for tax-raising powers if I'd thought they might be used. If we really want better services there's no other way. *Spero meliora*.

New Year's morning

James Shaw Grant

1998

Thursday 1 January

At my age, a diary is a rear view mirror. I never rise on New Year's morning thinking of the future, or even of the present. I still feel my father's hand on my shoulder, waking me gently, as he did on New Year's morning 79 years ago, to tell me of the worst disaster which ever befell my native Lewis.

As we slept, the Admiralty yacht *Iolaire* was wrecked at the entrance to Stornoway harbour and 300 Lewis and Harris seamen, who had survived four years of bloody warfare, were drowned within a few yards of home. There was no counselling then for the mothers who lost sons, the wives who lost husbands, or the girls who lost their sweethearts and their hopes. Nor was there counselling for the men who, day after day, laboured in the January cold, with grappling irons, to retrieve the bodies of their friends; or the crofters who came from distant villages to the mortuary, in their little country carts, on the first stage of a hasty burial, sometimes completed late at night by the light of lanterns.

My childhood and my 30 years as the editor of the *Stornoway Gazette* were passed under the shadow of that event. It altered the lifestyle of the island for a generation or more. It is not, however, a gloomy memory. While the young folk of Lewis today are conscious of their pressing problems in finding work and a purpose in life, I marvel at the miracle – the slow, laborious miracle – by which the island I knew when it was in the Slough of Despond was transformed into the vibrant island I know today. It seems an appropriate mood of sober, realistic hope in which to confront the year in which Scotland's parliament will finally take shape.

Saturday 31 January

The last day of January is more significant in my diary than the first. My late wife, Cathie, was born on 31 January 1922, in Hartford, Connecticut. For 10 years she grew up as a young American, living in a modern home and attending a school where discipline was free and easy. Then the family returned to Lewis, where she had quickly to learn to trim the paraffin lamps, cut the peats and draw water in buckets from a distant well.

She attended a village school where discipline was strict and Gaelic was the language of the playground. Like many Lewis families of that generation, which emigrated and then returned, she was educated in an anomalous world where English-speaking children learned Gaelic in the playground, in self-defence, and Gaelic-speaking children learned English in the classroom, for fear of the tawse.

I was born and brought up in Lewis but being a townie, with no country cousins to

holiday with, I was a monoglot English speaker. My 'American' wife acted for nearly 40 years as my (unpaid) Gaelic adviser. My English adviser too! Although I did not speak Gaelic, many Gaelic words and constructions infiltrated my English through Stornoway slang. Being monolingual, I did not spot the intruders. Being bilingual, Cathie did. Because she was a Gaelic speaker, she spoke better English than I do. That seems a happy thought with which to remember her.

Two Johns

Arnold Kemp

1998

Wednesday 8 April

An exhibition of John Bellany's works in Cork Street, Mayfair. The artist and Helen, his wife, are surrounded by friends and admirers. The work is mainstream Bellany, full of disturbing and powerful symbolisms, but I suspect the artist's own personal development is taking him in the direction of less complicated, though no less accomplished, townscapes and landscapes. I lust briefly after a painting of Port Seton until I observe the price.

The previous week, while preparing an article for *The Observer*, I had an interesting conversation with Bellany about John Knox. The brooding figure of the great reformer has had a powerful influence on Bellany and his work. As a youth, in Eyemouth and Port Seton, he was thoroughly peppered with hellfire preaching, and Knox continues to haunt him. By an odd coincidence, on the day I telephoned him, Bellany upset by the untimely death of Alan Bold, companion of his convivial youth, had fetched from storage a painting of John Knox on his deathbed. He placed it on an easel and spent some hours contemplating it. 'It made me think of the profound things,' said Bellany. 'Knox seemed to be looking at me and saying, Boldie's away but you're still here.'

Knox has become topical because the Scottish Parliament's temporary home will be the Assembly Hall; its entrance is dominated by his statue. I am canvassing opinion on the question of whether Knox, marginalised by secular Scotland these last 20 years or so, and vilified for expunging the artistic and bohemian impulse from Scottish life, should be rehabilitated. Bellany agrees that he should, though there are parts of Knox that remain rebarbative, for example his dogmatism and his prohibition of graven images. But his belief in universal education and the welfare of the poor still have much force and relevance.

Like me, Bellany believes Knox has been traduced by history, which has hung round his shoulders the attitudes of later Protestant extremists who outlawed theatre and music. And Mary Queen of Scots was always the heroine, Knox the glowering villain. The Auld Alliance is to some extent a romantic dream. With the help of the English and a scheming native aristocracy, Knox helped Scotland get rid of Mary's Frenchified court which it had come to revile. Even the historian Tom Devine, descended from the Irish Catholic tradition, believes that Knox, in his more positive aspects at least, should take his place in the pantheon of New Scotland.

A memory of Shannon Davis

George Rosie

1998

(Rosie and his colleague Ross Wilson had spent most of June criss-crossing the eastern seaboard of the USA for a television film, talking to people who lost relatives in the Lockerbie bombing.)

Friday 17 July

A drive through the Queen's Park on a sunlit evening. At times like these, there are few finer sights in Europe. Not even Prague, Florence or Vienna has anything so fine to offer. Arthur's Seat and the Salisbury Crag are lit gold by the setting sun. The effect is heightened by the lengthening shadows. The grass is a vivid shade of green. On the steep flank of Arthur's Seat youngsters are scrambling their way up the hill, their bright clothes points of colour against the dark scree and whin.

But the sight of them brings an unexpected tug of sadness. I suddenly remember that 10 summers ago, another youngster marvelled at the rocky old hill. 'We even woke up early enough to climb Arthur's Seat, a mountain behind our bed and breakfast, to see the sunrise,' she wrote back to her mother in Connecticut. 'It was freezing and windy. Pneumonia will be worth it! We actually climbed a mountain twice – what a work out!'

The writer was 19-year-old Shannon Davis, one of the 35 students from Syracuse University who died at Lockerbie in 1988. I came across her postcard to her mother and family in the Pan Am 103 archive in the university's library. The photograph with it shows a pretty, brown-haired girl with intelligent green eyes and a wide smile. A few days after finding the postcard, Ross Wilson and I met Shannon's mother Jane in a riverside restaurant in Westport, Connecticut. Jane told us that Shannon had been reluctant to make the trip to the UK because her father had died a few months previously (killed in a road accident in Saudi Arabia) and money was short. 'But I told her she was going because that's what her dad would have wanted,' Jane Davis says. And so Shannon found her way to Arthur's Seat.

It's plain that Shannon loved Edinburgh and its volcano. 'We climbed the first night to see the lights,' she enthused in her small, neat handwriting, 'and decided we had to see the sunrise the next morning. We also took wine and sodas to the green at the bottom last night to watch the stars. This place is absolutely gorgeous'.

Shannon's postcard home was one of those cheerful, tacky ones with a photograph of a bagpiper in a feather bonnet over the slogan, 'From Scotland'. But her words are heartbreaking. 'This is the most beautiful country I've ever seen,' she informed her mother, brother and sister. 'I love it. Someday I'll bring you here, mom.' I suppose she did. Like

many relatives, Jane Davis made the pilgrimage to Lockerbie to see where her daughter had died. My guess is that I'll remember Shannon every time I drive through the Queen's Park or wander up the 'mountain' she so admired.

Bowled out

Kenneth Roy

1999

Thursday 25 February

A brochure promoting the virtues of the new Scottish Parliament arrives uninvited in the post. The voting system is pretty well unfathomable, but one suspects it is a carve-up which will become obvious to the electorate only when it is too late to do anything about it.

Saturday 27 February

An item in the press about two people familiar to me. Neil Gow, the local sheriff, entered the Bank of Scotland in Ayr to cash a cheque. He was wearing his 144-year-old bowler hat. As he did so, a security door collapsed on him. The hat took the weight of the impact, saving its owner from a premature encounter with the lord justice clerk upstairs. At this critical moment, Ron Low, custodian of my overdraft, rushed out, profuse in his apologies. When Ron asked him if the bowler could be replaced in Ayr, Neil Gow apparently replied: 'Certainly not'. The upshot is that the sheriff is to have an all-expenses-paid trip to London to be fitted with a new bowler hat. I think the Bank of Scotland has escaped lightly. But it was high time that Gow had a new hat anyway.

Sunday 28 February

Line-up of Labour's Scottish Cabinet. Of the 20 faces, I recognise four.

Tuesday 2 March

Lunch in the Basil Street Hotel, Knightsbridge. Man at the next table: 'I remember my accountant 25 years ago saying I should buy into containers. Containers? What the hell are containers? But see how they've mushroomed'.

Wednesday 3 March

Having climbed five floors to his Pall Mall eyrie, arrive breathlessly for a meeting with the patrician figure of Lord Rees-Mogg. He has a copy of *The Scotsman* on his lap, claiming it is his favourite daily newspaper. Indeed he goes on to assert with a straight face that *The Scotsman* is now a superior paper to the *Washington Post*. A very English gentleman. He describes his working day when he was editor of *The Times*: arrive at the office around 11.30am, lunch and political gossip at the Garrick club, return to the office, leave around 7pm for an official dinner, home with the first editions by chauffeur-driven car at 11.30pm. He was able to dictate a daily 1,000-word leader off the top of his head in one easy sitting. A vanished world.

About the modern media, he is surprisingly sanguine. He believes that we have never had more good journalism. But he deplores the lack of charity among the hounds of Fleet Street which forces politicians out of office for minor errors of judgement.

Mistaken identities

Kenneth Roy

1999

Saturday 24 July

Resume the West Highland Way at the point at which we abandoned it last month, and walk by the side of Loch Lomond to Rowardennan. Much camping and caravanning activity along the route.

Puzzled by the security-conscious Rowardennan Hotel, I ask the Australian receptionist why the front door is kept locked. Because, she explains, non-resident walkers abuse the hotel's hospitality by using the bathrooms to shower. Our bedroom could stage a small conference and has been tastefully redecorated. Go in search of the dining room – open only for breakfast. The oddities of Scottish tourism never cease to surprise. But the bar supper is more than okay and the mood of the place extremely jolly. The barman is Australian.

Sunday 25 July

Wander downstairs at 8.30am, unlock the hotel, and find three middle-aged women on the doorstep.

'Please. We'd like breakfast.'

I explain that it is not within my power to feed them.

'But you look such a nice gentleman.'

'Thank you, but I'm only a guest.'

Crestfallen looks all round. 'Oh! We thought you were the *proprietor*.'

Next, an agitated Englishman appears from the chalets in the hotel grounds. He too accuses me of being the owner and demands that I do something about the alarm that is ringing out over the village.

Finally order is restored, the alarm is silenced, and breakfast is served – by another Australian.

Embark on a treacherous half-day walk to Inversnaid. We are staying at Inversnaid Lodge, a former shooting lodge run by a refugee from the metropolitan publishing world, whose partner organises photography courses on the premises. The place is bursting with amateur snappers.

Dinner is delayed while we await the arrival of four walkers – three young women from London and their male companion, all hot, blistered and moaning like hell. After dinner, the women besport themselves on the lounge carpet, nursing their aching limbs and comparing loud notes about the day's ordeal.

Monday 26 July

Odd little incident when checking out. A fellow guest eyes me curiously: 'I pride myself on being able to tell what people do just by looking at them. I've decided that you are a doctor'. Lift to Aberfoyle, then bus home.

Tuesday 27 July

A group of elderly women slightly the worse for wear stifle their laughter as they point at me across a crowded bar.

One shouts over: 'You're the spitting image of Father Cassidy. The resemblance is unbelievable'.

'Is this a compliment?'

'Certainly, son. He's a good man, Father Cassidy.'

Tuesday 3 August

A confession – are you listening, Father Cassidy? I have bought a mobile phone. The cut-price war for pay-as-you-go mobiles – you can get them in Tesco for £49.95 – has led to what BT calls 'unprecedented demand' and their call centre is jammed with customers desperate for a top-up. Quite soon, I find myself uttering the shameful words, 'I'm on the train'.

Saturday 7 August

Opposite a party of gregarious Glaswegians in a restaurant. Much nudge-nudge-wink-wink before one of them asks if I would mind settling a bet.

'Go ahead.'

'I say you're Murray Ritchie, my friend here says you're not.'

I was able to assure them that I had never been Murray Ritchie.

'You have such a famous face. Who are you, then?'

It's a question I have been known to ask myself.

The pub crawl of the bees

Ian Mackenzie

2000

Thursday 29 June

We have a sunken walled back garden which, now the children are grown up, I love dearly. Not sufficiently to work at it but more than enough to work in it. The children were great fun when rampant, but the fun was not conducive to a National Trust effect. It was difficult to have beautiful thoughts in an area comprising combat zone, splashing facility, mudbath and disco. In this so far beautiful summer, the garden seems to have finally decided those stressful days are over and has thrown everything it can into the air: every kind of vegetation, blossom and flowery thing.

This morning I had coffee out here. The energy of the universe was expressed most of all by bees being busy doing their bee-loud humming and bumming around in flowers thing, a riotous pub crawl if ever I saw one. Coming out here again at 5pm, I find they're still at it. The bees love foxglove, burrowing into the coloured trumpets like curious cats into carrier bags. But bees get nectar, what do cats get? At this moment, our cat is beyond getting anything except sunburn, her upside down pose wanton in the extreme.

In winter it's sadder. All the slaters totter into my basement den across there and line the skirting board to die. This mass Mahlerian goodbye to the world lends a melancholy to the shadowy room so I put on the anglepoise and turn up Wagner loudly. But that's not yet. The soundtrack today mixes in those comfortably human sounds thrown up by summer: someone hammering somewhere, a little boy chortling, a bossy girl shouting 'stop that', and the long withdrawing roar of holiday traffic.

The death of Donald Dewar

Ian Mackenzie

2000

Wednesday 11 October

6.30am

Wake to hear that Donald [Dewar] is on life support. The heaviness one feels echoes waking up to hear of John Smith's final heart attack. After John Smith, this is a *Sunset Song* too many. The Dewar tribute at the Smith funeral still rings in one's head, that staccato rasp, poetry *Molto Vivace*. But unlike others who only play with words, Donald took over the practical job for his buddy. It has cost him.

With Smith gone, Salmond retired, and now this, the image of autumn leaves presses hard. In Buchan where I grew up, the few trees stood out all year, bent and bare on the skyline. Autumn didn't happen. If summer came, could winter be far behind. Whereas I now live surrounded by trees, some great and tall.

The leaves here in the west do their autumn alchemy, spreading their colours between the roofs of the town. Any day now the equinox gale will tear them down. For a couple of days, the streets will be carpeted in gold before the rains come and darkness falls. Our collie, Nell, is experiencing her own autumn. Her exterior remains beautiful, but darkness is beginning to fall over her eyes. What is more serious is her sudden deafness. In a world of fast traffic, it's necessary now to put her on the lead for much of the time. Where she used to fly, now she pads close by. I don't know how much of the street carpet she'll see, but till the end she can tread softly on a carpet of love.

Afternoon: Donald switched off.

Wednesday 18 October

Donald's funeral finely done. A great Glasgow day. Minister of Glasgow and its cathedral, Dr Bill Morris, being 900 years old, is only allowed to top and tail the proceedings, but does it with unflorid dignity. He may not have made the cathedral a vibrant Scottish kirk, but who could. What he has done, as befits a Welsh mystic, is maintain the numinosity of a historic Scottish shrine.

Saturday 21 October

We have a new (interim) First Minister. At the end of the day, by the time I heard Henry McLeish use the phrase 'at the end of the day' for the sixth time on a brief *Good Morning Scotland* interview yesterday, my sympathy was, at the end of the day, at an end. Required: one candid friend to monitor Mr McLeish's ends of the day.

A smell of burning

Ian Mackenzie

2001

Thursday 5 April 2001

The woman phoning me in the afternoon is in tears. I'm not accustomed to this; she's a bright and level-headed sort. I know this because she's my wife.

For me, it could be worse. I could be there, smelling the smoke and hearing the bangs as the slaughtermen chase the sheep. The sheep that only a few minutes ago my wife helped Drew, the young farmer, to move from the field beside granny's glebe house to the next field beside the graveyard.

It's Dumfries and Galloway, where my mother-in-law in her mid-80s lives alone, except when family visit. My father-in-law in retirement had Belted Galloways, but since he died, the glebe fields have served as grazing for Drew's sheep. Elizabeth had names for three favourites among those she has just led to the slaughter. Yes, animals get killed to be eaten. But not chased round a field in the swirling smoke of other animals being burned. The little valley that runs down to the Solway is full of the foul smoke. Across the Solway, the Lake District mountains loom over a mirroring murderousness.

Warned that her mother's road was about to be closed by Army and police, Elizabeth made a dash and got there with six hours to spare. Now they are barricaded in, she and her mother; the road is closed for an indefinite period.

Sunday 8 April 2001: Palm Sunday

Elizabeth phones. Her voice is not less haunted (I dread seeing her face) but is more focused. I find out why: she's been to church. Not to a church building. There is no access to the three churches in the scattered parish, and the roads are closed to the three church halls. But the minister has negotiated access to the community hall. It is packed out, standing room only. Although the start is delayed, people are arriving up to the end, having zigzagged to and fro, here, there, and everywhere, to find a way round to the community hall.

The minister opens the service by asking everyone to stand for a minute's silence. He then reads slowly through a litany of herds and flocks slaughtered, some of them famous for generations. Burly farmers are sobbing. After simple prayers, words and psalms, there's coffee, tea, and sandwiches at the back of the hall. During this, everyone signs a declaration of solidarity with the farmers, families and workers unable to make it to this gathering. Copies will be distributed when and where possible.

About 10 million cows and sheep were slaughtered in the foot and mouth epidemic of 2001

There's been a murder

Anne-Marie McManus

2002

Friday 1 February

As a bad Catholic girl from Springburn, I have always thought that purgatory is full of Glaswegians – most of them from Springburn. Then again, I have always thought that Springburn is already Hell on Earth, that all us poor bastards have already met the 'Big Yin', and that we've already been judged. Springburn is one of Britain's poorest constituencies and I live bang slap in the middle of it. Like a lot of people here, I see my residence as temporary, and hope to move soon.

Today, when I took my young son, Stuart, to school I asked if there was any news of an after-school place for him. The head of the after-school club informed me that there was a waiting list. So much for 'an increasing number of after-school places'. I can't find work until my son is in one of these clubs, and he's dying to go as all his friends are there.

Tonight I couldn't sleep for hearing my friendly neighbours above me. What did I say about Hell on Earth?

Saturday 2 February

Punch and Judy upstairs stopped arguing at about 4am. Awakened at 7.45am with my five-year-old wanting his breakfast. Oh, the joys of being a parent!

Monday 4 February

Went up to the shopping centre to talk to some of the people of Springburn about a proposed community project. There was a lot of support for the project, especially from the 30-55-year-olds. They said they weren't really catered for in Springburn and that pubs are their only option. Maybe that's why there are so many people walking about the place drunk and causing fights, one of which I was given the pleasure (?) of witnessing. They were fighting over a bottle of Buckfast. A sad sight. The two old men had known each other for years, and used to work together at the railway loco works.

Tuesday 5 February

A workman was due from the council to repair our intercom system, which has been broken since I moved to this house four and a half years ago. He didn't appear. Surprise, surprise! My whole house is in a bad state of disrepair and the council won't do a thing about it. I must get out of here before I go mad. In saying that, a lot of people think I already am.

Wednesday 6 February

Wee Stuart's 5th birthday. Made him his favourite breakfast – toast, jam and Coco Pops with fresh orange. He got out of bed like a shot and picked up his cards. 'There's hundreds here!', he said excitedly. There were eight: children do have a tendency to exaggerate. Later, we had a party at McDonalds for him and his pals. It was a nightmare: fights, tears and swear words I have never heard. Where do children hear these words? From their parents – that's who.

Wednesday 13 February

I have not got a drink problem, it's just that the drink has a problem with me. Me and my friend Marie went to the Celtic Club in Springburn and got – how shall I put it? – absolutely shit-faced. We were dancing on tables and generally making a nuisance of ourselves. Promptly ejected from the club.

Thursday 14 February

The mother of all hangovers.

Friday 15 February

I went to see my partner's mother. She's 65 and has a mental illness. She had ECT six times within three years when the treatment was still in its experimental stages. Arrived to a barrage of abuse and left because of it. Upset for the rest of the day.

Saturday 16 February

I arrived back in Springburn from a day out in Fife to the sight of an ambulance and police cars. In the street beside mine, where a friend stays, it seemed something terrible had happened. As I was walking round to see my friend, a uniformed policeman was putting up a cordon.

'You can't come this way, hen. Where are you going?'

'I'm just going into this close here to make sure my pal is okay,' I said.

'You can't go in there tonight, hen. It's become a crime scene.'

I have known the police in our area long enough not to ask what had happened. I returned to my own house to find that my partner and son weren't in. I was struck with a wave of panic. What if they had been caught up in something round there?

Against my better judgement, I climbed the fences that connect our backs and chapped at my friend's window.

'Where's Stuart and the wean?'

'They're in here, Anne-Marie.'

Stuart came to the window. 'There's been a murder. I'm waiting on the police's okay to go home. The wean's okay.'

The policeman came into the back and chased me home. I found out later that this was

where a 21-year-old boy had been murdered. He'd been staying in the area for only two weeks.

Sunday 4 March

When I woke up today, all I wanted to do was relax but I had to take wee Stuart to see the latest children's blockbuster. I also had to go shopping for the old lady upstairs. You know the saying – God loves a trier. He must adore me.

When I was up at the shopping centre, I met an old friend I hadn't seen since my school days 10 years ago. She looked terrible. She'd been one of the nicest looking girls in our year, but now she was a skeleton, with large, dark bags under her eyes. She told me she had met her current partner seven years ago and they had three children. After the birth of her first, she'd become depressed and had started using valium and heroin. I was shocked. She was the last person I'd expected to get into drugs. Now her children have been taken from her and she has lost her partner. She is selling sex for money to fund her habit. She feels she has nothing to live for.

I asked her how she dealt with what she did for a living, and she said it was okay and she didn't feel anything – the drugs numbed all her feelings. She was just a walking zombie.

A whiff of bullshit

Anne-Marie McManus

2002

Tuesday 23 April

Grab a cup of coffee and start puffing my lungs out for Scotland. I've had two and a half fags before the train leaves Queen Street. That must be some sort of record.

Ten minutes into the journey, and the trolley comes round. Twelve o'clock: still a bit early for a drink. Buy one anyway. Once the trolley leaves, this man from Fife starts talking to me. He says he's on his way to Mull just now. I say to myself, great. I'll be stuck with him on the ferry too, and he's probably an idiot. He asks where I'm heading. I tell him I'm going to Iona and it turns out he stayed on Iona for 18 months.

He explains that he came over and did some work with the Iona Community. Once his time was up with them, he stayed for a while longer and slept on people's floors and on beaches – said he loved the place so much he couldn't go home. He collected stones when he was there and made jewellery out of them. I start to smell my first whiff of bullshit. This guy, my gut is telling me, is a piss artist, get away from him. But it would be rude to move, so I endure him.

Finally step foot on Iona. I haven't been here for two years, since I was one of the crew on the *Spirit of Fairbridge*, a boat owned by the national charity I was working for: I promised myself that I would go back every six months, but we're always making promises like that.

Nothing much has changed.

Chops for dinner at the hotel. Disgusting: far too bloody.

I walk along past the ferry terminal to the pub and sit drinking with some people from the Community. These people come and work for free in a kind of retreat, making and selling crafts and helping around the abbey. They have this genuine love for the island which is apparent in all their eyes. I end up completely three sheets and walk back to the hotel around 11.30. It's pitch black; stumble a couple of times. Fall onto my bed fully-clothed and then – blank.

Wednesday 24 April

My hangover isn't that bad, so I manage a fried breakfast of venison sausages, everything cooked to perfection. Then a walk along the beach, where St Columba first landed in Scotland. He was an Irish aristocrat, but gave it all up to become a man of the cloth. Much like St Patrick before him, he wanted to bring Christianity to these parts. He shouldn't have bothered bringing it to Scotland. Look at the problems he's caused!

Find a couple of bits of Iona green stone, one with a lot of marble in it.

I speak to one of the locals here, who tells me that the nearest police station is on Mull.

There seems to be little if any crime on Iona, and any crime there is is caused by visitors – shoplifters – and the people of Iona deal with it themselves. I start to get paranoid, thinking she is warning me off.

In the afternoon, I walk to the other side of the island and inspect the ruins of the nunnery, which are in surprisingly good condition. I try to get a feel of what the place must have been like a couple of hundred years ago, but feel nothing, so move on to the abbey. It's very simple, but beautiful in its simplicity. Go looking for the place where the Kings of Scotland are supposed to be buried, but no sign of them: and I can't even locate the grave of John Smith. Across from the abbey, there's a field with some lambs being sheared. They're like small children bleating to get out of bathtime.

At quarter to nine, I walk up to the abbey for evening service. I'm accompanied by a man from Inverness who is here investigating an insurance claim; I think to myself, I wouldn't admit that to anybody. He turns out to be a very good religious man, makes the pilgrimage to Iona every year, so it is great to come for work.

The priests/ministers/reverends (I don't know what religion they are: masses are said in the abbey by all religions and all religions go to it – a refreshing approach) take their places. They're not wearing robes. This is alien to me. I was brought up in the Catholic Church and had never seen a priest without his robes. How informal. Everyone at the service anoints one another in turn. The man from Inverness anoints me and I anoint him. For some reason, I feel very emotional and want to cry but I don't. I am more than positive that I have experienced some sort of spiritual peace – or maybe my heart has been touched by an angel.

I lie awake all night thinking of the importance of this event, as I am now calling it.

Thursday 25 April

Shattered on account of staying up all night thinking. Keep to myself on the journey, fall asleep on the train, wake up with someone telling me we have arrived in Glasgow. I go home to shitty Springburn and straight to bed.

Monday 6 May

Bank holiday Monday, which I hate. A Bank Holiday is just a continuation of Sunday, which I also hate.

Tuesday 7 May

Yesterday is over at last. I take wee Stuart to school and head for the shopping centre. Bump into someone who stays beside me. She's being bullied by these young boys who sit in her close and drink, so she's moving next week.

Monday 13 May

Take the wean to school and get his report card. It seems my boy is good at most things and socially is quite advanced. This must be a good sign, as he is the youngest in his class.

Saturday 25 May

The dreaded day: I have now turned 28. Two years away from 30: a frightening thought. I only get four birthday cards and one present but I'm not bothered. Being nearly 30 isn't something to celebrate. I drink a litre bottle of vodka tonight. To forget.

Friday 31 May

Before the bell rings at Stuart's school this morning, two mothers begin fighting in front of the primary 1, 2 and 3 classes. Jump in and split it up but my wee boy is crying for me to let them fight. I see genuine panic in his eyes.

Sunday 9 June

Read, watch TV, play with wee Stuart, cook. I feel like a right housewife and I'm only 28. Still, I'm not a teenager any more. Teenagers don't get cellulite and fat stomachs the way older women do.

Tuesday 11 June

On Saturday, I was offered a house in Fife – Glenrothes to be exact. I'm going to view it today. All my family originate from Glasgow but now stay in Glenrothes. My dad picks me up from the bus station and takes me to the house. It's lovely. Up and down stairs, two big rooms, toilet, large kitchen and living room. I can't decide what to do. I love Glasgow but I hate where I'm living just now.

Anne-Marie decided to move to Fife

The swan of Cellardyke

Kenneth Roy

2006

Thursday 6 April

Avian flu has arrived on these shores. Help! 'The day we've all dreaded' is the headline of the morning. Hysteria barely suppressed. An ITV presenter, Mark Austin, has been beamed up to Cellardyke harbour in Fife, scene of the unfolding global health crisis. The disintegrating feathers have been removed for forensic examination by Inspector MacBug, so there is nothing much for Austin to see.

Nevertheless, it seems to be the end of civilisation as we have known it: we have the media's word for this. ITN has established a 'Bird Flu Incident Room', within which young persons are manning phones and dashing about clutching important pieces of paper, while a bank of 'experts' has been assembled to deal with 'enquiries', which are 'flooding in'. In Guildford, Surrey, where the Bird Flu Incident Room is berthed for the night, a punter in the street says he's considering buying one of those protective masks you can pick up on ebay for 15 quid.

Sunday 9 April

ITN reports that – shock horror – the dead swan came from Montrose. Sir Hamish Flu of the Department of Health and Dr Armageddon Pennington, the well-known bacteriologist and doomsayer, discuss the likely extent of the death toll.

For light relief on this disturbing Sabbath, one turns gratefully to the bared bottoms of Brian Cox, the actor, and his son. They are in New York taking part in some Tartan Week, an occasion for hairy Scottish bottoms if ever there was one. Mr Cox says he is doing it for Sean. The things we do for Sean. The First Minister is there too, metaphorically caught with his kilt down for failing to return to his native patch to deal with the unfolding global health crisis. Mark Austin, still freezing half to death at the harbourside, is believed to have caught a deadly variant of the disease known as Bird Flu Overkill.

Tuesday 11 April

End of media-induced panic. The swan was not from Montrose after all. It was not one of ours at all. It was passing through on a tourist visa and somehow washed up in Fife, as so many do. 'The day we've all dreaded' was not the day we've all dreaded, just another one to be got through – and by now the papers are so bored with the story that the *Daily Telegraph* relegates it to a graveyard slot on page 13.

Sunday 16 April

Never die on a Saturday. Muriel Spark didn't but the people breaking the news chose to wait until yesterday. Sunday papers are not interested in carrying obituaries; it seems to be against their natures. Thus the *Independent on Sunday* confines Ms Spark to a slot in its news pages, painting her as a certifiable old bat. Coincidentally, the Gaelic crooner Calum Kennedy has 'passed away'. How piquant that two of the Scottish notables of our time should be united in death with the Cellardyke swan.

Thursday 20 April

Bird Flu has vanished from the public prints. Not a word of it. How copes the Bird Flu Incident Room? Has it yet returned from distant Guildford? Has anything been heard of Mark Austin lately? Or is everyone feeling just a bit silly?

Mayday

Tessa Ransford

2007

Tuesday 1 May

I've been asked to review a book, *Scarcely Ever Out Of My Thoughts*, the edited letters of Valda Grieve to her husband Hugh MacDiarmid. It represents several years of research and work on the part of Beth Junor, the editor, a writer who was imprisoned eight times during the Greenham Common protests. It is published by Word Power Books, an independent bookshop in Edinburgh. I find myself reading about the difficulties of cooking on a range, having no electricity, fridge, telephone or washing machine, no car, but two posts a day – in fact, the old-fashioned society in which I myself lived as a child and young adult. We didn't think how difficult it was. It was just life as we knew it. However Valda's courage and optimism when alone in the dark in a cold damp cottage, through the long stormy winter in Shetland, with a child often ill and no money to pay the basic bills, fill me with admiration for her. 'I can't help feeling like a rat in a trap,' she wrote. Some rat, some trap.

Today being Mayday, I'm remembering how my daughter used to climb Arthur's Seat to greet the dawn with her friends and bathe her face in the dew, while correcting students' dissertations, a couple sent to me by email from Queen Margaret University. One is about the need for good, continual, internal communication within organisations if they are to be successful, and the other is about domestic abuse in Malta, accentuated by a patriarchal church. That such dissertations are being written is surely progress, whatever we may say about the decline in standards in our universities.

Wednesday 2 May

Last night, I was typing up the minutes of the two and a half hour Scottish PEN committee meeting we had yesterday afternoon. The *Sally on Sunday* radio programme is going to give six minutes to Scottish PEN in view of our 80th anniversary and I was interviewed about our work in translating immigrant writers. Several of us were interviewed for over an hour, out of which they will select the six minutes. I don't know when it will be on but will have to wake up early I suppose every Sunday until it appears.

Today, I was at Queen Margaret University helping a student with an essay on public relations as a manipulative tool of governments and a tearful Saudi nurse trying to complete a report for a deadline in a second language which she can speak but not write. On the way home, I voted and was told the turnout had been disappointing. How can people not vote? It beggars belief. I looked at people on the bus today, two 40-minute journeys, and they all looked glum as glum. It is rare to see someone on a bus with a smile. Why? Is it just Edinburgh?

Sophie's birthday

Mick North

2007

Monday 1 October

I ease into October, opening the bedroom shutters onto a misty morning. Misty mornings on the loch often herald a beautiful day, and today is no exception. On the 10-minute drive into Killin for milk and a paper, the road rises up above the mist to reveal Ben Lawers in glorious autumn sunshine and then descends again into the mist from which the trees emerge eerily. By the time I drive home to Lawers, the mist has begun to lift from Loch Tay. The water furnishes stunning reflections of the hills along its southern side. This can be a beautiful place to live.

Tuesday 2 October

Seventeen years ago today, also a Tuesday, I was called away from work by a message from Barbara to say she had gone into labour. A few hours later, our only daughter Sophie Jane was born at Stirling Royal Infirmary.

Today would have been the 17th of Sophie's birthdays, but she was only able to celebrate five of them. I go off to Dunblane to spend time at the cemetery where Sophie and many of her classmates are interred in the beautiful surroundings of the Memorial Garden constructed after the tragedy at Dunblane Primary School in March 1996.

It's another glorious sunny day, allowing me to sit in the Memorial Garden in peaceful contemplation and reflection. The fountain, engraved with the names of the children and their teacher, provides a comforting background murmur. Sophie's birthday is always a day to focus on the joy and pleasure she brought me during her short life, and there are plenty of birthday flowers from many whose life she touched and from others who came to know her through my recollections. I light candles that will keep burning overnight.

During the afternoon, I call in on friends in Dunblane and in the evening join some of my closest friends for a meal at Clive's in Bridge of Allan. Sheena and Stuart's daughter Rosie was Sophie's best friend at nursery. She is now choosing universities and will be getting her first car for her 17th birthday this month. It's great to hear how she's getting on, but hard to imagine how things could have been.

A few years ago, I set up the Sophie North Charitable Trust in memory of Sophie. Each March we make a donation to mark the anniversary of the Dunblane tragedy and each October a birthday donation. Today, we write a cheque for the Yorkhill Children's Foundation.

A sense of uncertainty

Tom Devine

2008

Monday 4 February

The Herald has revealed that Westminster has performed a volte face in relation to the planned review of Holyrood's powers. After opposition to the idea, Whitehall is now apparently prepared to provide resources to enable the proposed Constitutional Commission to start work. Devolution is now generally agreed by all parties to be a process rather than an event.

How Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, aka George Robertson, sometime Secretary of State for Scotland, must regret his now notorious prediction that devolution would kill nationalism 'stone dead'. Instead, the unthinkable has happened; the SNP is in government while the current Scottish Labour leadership remains mired in allegations about breaking funding rules. The original devolution settlement contained too many anomalies to remain set in stone for long anyway but the results of the May 2007 elections to the Scottish Parliament, coupled with Labour's recent difficulties, have added an intriguing new uncertainty about the future governance of the country. Predictions of the Robertsonian type are no longer possible.

Tuesday 5 February

Fairly typical day at the office, marked by a conveyor belt of different responsibilities. A university professor nowadays does not simply teach, research and write but manages, applies for external funding, supervises graduate students, sits on any number of committees, responds to media enquiries, writes book reviews, mentors younger colleagues, gives external lectures at home and abroad, administers research grants, attends internal seminars and conferences, sits on grant-awarding bodies, writes references for undergraduates, postgraduates and colleagues, while leaving some time to think and to read in and around his/her subject. Often it is time for family and friends which is sacrificed. This inevitably produces feelings of guilt together with perennial resolutions to lead a more balanced and normal life.

Wednesday 6 February

In 1914 over 700 million people made up the British Empire and it is now abundantly clear that Scotland (population in 1911, just over four million) played an absolutely central role at all levels of the imperial administration, commerce, professions, identity and, by no means least, the military machine: 'They, the Scots, claimed not simply a reasonable but a quite indecent share of the imperial spoils,' as one scholar has succinctly put it.

An aspect which particularly intrigues me is the national memory of Empire, or perhaps more accurately, the lack of it, until very recently; Scotland's collective amnesia from the 1960s to 2000 about its imperial past is indeed very striking. Between 1937 and 2001, not a single book addressed a subject now regarded by historians as important as the Reformation, the Enlightenment and industrialisation in the formation of the modern nation.

Looking back, it is plain that Scottish readers for much of that period preferred the 'victim history' books of John Prebble, on such topics as the Highland Clearances, Culloden, Glencoe and the Darien disaster, all of them selling in large numbers, to the frustration and chagrin of the Scottish history academic establishment of the time which scathingly dismissed them as an unpalatable mix of fact and fiction, while probably at the same time secretly envying Prebble's sales and royalties. But what does the popularity of this genre tell us about the national mentality of the 1960s and 1970s? It certainly produced a deeply distorted version of the Scottish past which the schools were incapable of correcting.

Thursday 7 February

Meeting in the afternoon, at her request, with Fiona Hyslop, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, together with her ministers, Adam Ingram and Maureen Watt. The SNP Government seek to 'embed' Scottish history within the curriculum of our schools. It is a laudable objective, not least because of the long years of neglect of the subject and its even greater relevance in today's brave new world of devolution and perhaps even greater constitutional change in the future. However, the fact that in 2008 we are still arguing about this, and that the vast majority of Scotland's future citizens still are ignorant of the influences which have shaped their country, is met with astonishment in Europe where compulsory education in national history is the accepted norm and a proverbial no-brainer.

Friday 8 February

I am a member of the School of History, Classics and Archaeology in the University of Edinburgh. It is a privilege to teach and research there among so many colleagues of great ability and international reputation. The school can marshal a formidable array of intellectual talent (over 100 strong) but is hidebound, like every other academic institution in the country, by measurement, assessment, evaluation, intervention, regulation and the resulting luxuriant bureaucracies. Colleagues spend most of Friday preparing for the next inevitable investigation, this time on 'Teaching Quality'. The opportunity costs of this unrelenting 'assessment economy' (not to mention the impact on staff morale) are enormous and, given the dazzling intellectual quality and utter commitment to teaching and research of our recent appointees, totally pointless.

It may, however, have been required at the end of the 18th century. One well-informed

observer in 1796 thought most of the professoriate at Glasgow University were 'Drones or Triflers, Drunkards, or negligent in any manner of way'; so much for one of the cradles of the Scottish Enlightenment.

Saturday 9/Sunday 10 February

Escape early on Saturday morning to spend a long weekend at our house on Mull. Depending on the weather, we will go by the more direct route, via Oban to Craignure, or the longer but more beautiful drive through Glencoe, over the Corran Ferry, through Ardnamurchan and thence to Lochaline in the wilds of Morvern. The late Alasdair MacLean remarked in his classic *Night Falls on Ardnamurchan* that the crossing at Corran brings you into the real heart of Highland Scotland. How true.

The house lies in a remote part of the Ross of Mull, up a rough track which, as a 'destitution road', began life as a public work where crofting and cottar families toiled in exchange for a daily allowance of meal during the potato famine of the 1840s. The natural location is idyllic: eagles nest nearby; two secluded beaches of gold and silver sand are a short walk away; and a herd of feral goats – in local tradition the descendants of domesticated beasts, abandoned by their owners during the Clearances – are regular visitors. In contrast, the physical remains of many old communities mark the landscape in this part of the Ross. Ruined townships, surrounded by long-deserted cultivation beds for both grain and potatoes, litter the ground for miles around.

As usual, Catherine packs some novels in an attempt to diversify my reading tastes. I promise that I will make an effort after I have finished my current book. It is the second time I have read *With the Jocks: a Soldier's Struggle for Europe 1944 to 1945* by Peter White. White was a 24-year-old lieutenant in the KOSB during his battalion's advance through the Low Countries and into Germany in the closing months of the war in Europe. Only discovered after 50 years, his graphic, detailed and remarkably well-written diary of conflict and the men who fought and died in it, is a gem, one of the really great books to come out of the Second World War – utterly absorbing.

A journey of love and loss

Eileen Reid

2011

Monday 8 August

News from London is grim. The looting is out of control. My daughter lives in Forest Hill and even though I'm not prone to speculative anxiety (I am a natural-born 'risk assessor'), I begin to worry. Dad [Jimmy Reid] would be horrified at the actions of these young people but I can see him pacing with frustration. Since being diagnosed with and treated for breast cancer, I have been living on Twitter. But this rioting is too serious and I call @ampherlaw1, my friend for sharing innermost secrets and failings. We decide, despondently, that in extremis we are capable. Hobbes is right, I think to myself.

I get most of my news and commentary from Twitter but it is also a marvellous distraction. I have had discussions with people I have never met, from all over the world and all walks of life. Those with serious illness, if they're able to type, should join Twitter. The beauty is you don't need to be an 'ill person' on Twitter unless you want to be. I'm thinking of writing to Macmillan Cancer Support to offer my services delivering 'Twitter' classes.

What seems like the 200th removal of blood from my left arm takes place to ensure my 'bloods' are right for the next bout of chemotherapy on Wednesday. I have a needle phobia – or to be precise a blood phobia – my wonderful 'needle shrink' Chris from the Beatson told me. He also said, and everyone should know this, it is the only phobia where blood pressure plummets, hence the nausea and when the dreaded needle approaches: my ancient amygdala thinks it's a *dinofelis* with massive teeth. The blood recedes in response to the threat; I turn white, faint, and feign death. The solution is to get your blood pressure up – and you can do that yourself. Chris has saved me from serious mental disturbance and a permanent Hickman line in my neck. My dear friend for spontaneous compassion and concern arrives at the door with a beautiful pair of diamond studs to cheer me up.

Tuesday 9 August

It is mum and dad's 53rd anniversary today. This time last year, I remember hoping my dying dad would hang on. 'Don't die today, dad.' He hung on.

I have a tantrum at the clinic at the New Victoria where I am being treated. Given the number of managers employed by the NHS, why are there are so many systemic failures which have adverse effects on patients and cost money? As a patient hospitalised for tumour removal, lymph clearance, rushed in by ambulance last month, and as a regular outpatient, I am convinced that one's experience is determined by the competence, attention to detail, and the compassion of certain individuals – a brilliant bank nurse, an

expert consultant, two wonderful cancer nurses who have knowledge beyond their own specialisms and love their work, despite sclerotic management.

My husband writes a letter of complaint to the New Victoria and copies it to as many people as possible. It asks finally: 'Why did the Vic close its small breast cancer ward last year during the summer holidays, never to reopen?' All that expertise is dispersed to the far corners of the hospital and it matters. Hurtling down the specialist route medically is laudable, but the NHS must provide the corresponding structures.

As it is, it would have been sheer chance if a nurse of 14 years training in breast cancer had been available when I was taken into A&E then to a general surgical ward. She wasn't available, and it was hell because no-one knew what to do with me other than resuscitate me with a saline drip and pump masses of antibiotics into my veins. Actually, for a needlephobe I didn't do too badly. I surprised myself. The letter wasn't sent.

This afternoon, my old neighbour Jack McLean (the Urban Voltaire) pays me a visit to cheer me up as always. He never stops talking; but for the first time since I have met him I render him speechless by whipping off my wig to show him I have less hair than him and no comb-over. Poor Jack. A baby albino orangutan, with wispy bits of hair inexplicably upright (does chemo have electricity in it?) is not a good look. But anyway, Jack tells me a funny joke to cheer himself up. It goes: Stalin, Trotsky and Lenin are marooned on a desert island with nothing other than a tin of beans.

Lenin: 'I'll get it open.' Picks up a jaggy stone and messes around for hours.

Stalin: 'Stop pussy-footing around.' Drops two huge boulders from a great height but to no avail. Tin is bashed, but intact.

Trotsky: 'Comrades! Comrades! Enough! It takes a subtle mind to deal with such issues. I'll get it open. Come, sit around the tin with me and let's imagine we have a tin-opener.'

Giggling, a wave of nostalgia momentarily sweeps over me. Not for Stalin, of course.

Wednesday 10 August

*At earliest morning to the door,
He is not here; but far away
The noise of life begins again,
And ghastly thro the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day.
Tennyson. In Memoriam*

Actually it's not drizzling on this blank day in Glasgow, it's a deluge. I feel as low as I have ever felt in my life. No chemo today as I am not well enough to withstand it. It is also exactly a year since dad died, and the 40th anniversary of the UCS. I see him everywhere, his magnificent head, his eyes, his voice, his smile. He is everywhere, but nowhere.

There are some advantages to having cancer. The best is time to think and read that

which you could easily pass by in the ordinary, immediate way I have lived hitherto. I have discovered Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and I read a verse every morning. There's 133 of them, so it will take me a while. This morning I re-read:

*I sometimes hold it half a sin
To put in words the grief I feel;
For words, like Nature, half reveal
And half conceal the Soul within.*

Dad. How we miss you, but cannot express it aright.

Kenneth Roy writes about dad in the *Scottish Review*. As usual, he says what I know to be true: dad would have been incensed at alienated young people being labelled 'feral rats'. I read parts of dad's rectorial address, where he spoke to young people in a clarion call to reject the values of the 'rat race'.

Summer travels

Howie Firth

2017

Friday 14 July

The papers are full of the story of the new exhibition opening in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich today. *Death in the Ice* tells the story of Sir John Franklin's ill-fated expedition to find the North-West Passage and the remarkable discovery of his two ships in Canadian Arctic waters.

The exhibition also vindicates the reputation of John Rae, the Orkney-born doctor from the Hudson's Bay Company who tirelessly sought for Franklin and his men, travelling through the harshest of conditions. Inuit hunters told him they had met a group of white men 'travelling in company southward over the ice, and dragging a boat and sledges with them'. Later in the season, the Inuit had come across the bodies of the men, dead from starvation, with signs that desperation had led to cannibalism.

Rae was vilified for reporting this, and he is the only great Arctic explorer without a knighthood. He survived where Franklin did not because he learned to live off the land, and the life within it. He could walk on snowshoes 50 miles and more in a day, travelling when needed through darkness and snowstorms, and carrying a pack or pulling a sledge. He made long journeys – going on one occasion over 1,000 miles on foot, and at another time close to 1,400 miles by small boat, during which time he charted over 600 miles of unexplored coastline.

He was arguably the greatest Arctic explorer of them all, and perhaps one day may get his proper recognition.

Monday 17 July

On a visit to the Eden Valley in Cumbria, in a world of open landscapes of fields and woodland, with hedgerows and drystone walls and old routes across the hills. The road out of the valley climbs over the Hartside Pass and leads to Alston, England's highest market town, with steep cobbled streets and houses going back to the 17th century. It grew up around lead mining and has a deserved reputation for its food.

While enjoying home bakes in a cafe, it turns out that a lady there has a Roman fort on her farm – and just a couple of miles out from the town, there it is: Epiacum to the Romans, Whitley Castle today. It is the perfect position for a fort, with sweeping views in all directions, linked in those days to a network of signal stations. It may have controlled and protected lead mining in the area in addition to supporting defences on Hadrian's Wall. It's not been excavated but the grass-covered shape is clear, with steeply rising and falling defensive earthworks. Walking around it in the bright sunshine is a

delight, with information set out with thought and care by the family who own the land.

Many years of research in Moray by the late Ian Keillar produced strong hints of a Roman presence further north in Scotland than previously thought, and some of his aerial photographs show shapes that look very much like a Roman fort, with long straight sides and rounded corners. One of the sites he found, Birnie in Moray, has yielded up two rich hoards of Roman coins, although it seems to have been a native site. There is an opportunity awaiting any young archaeologist who studies Ian's work.

Thursday 27 July

Driving north to Orkney in the sunshine, and with just enough time to stop in Helmsdale at Timespan to sit in the sunshine by the river with a fresh crab sandwich and a pot of tea. There's the sound of the water, and of an oystercatcher coming in from the sea, and a look up to the stone bridge and the clock tower. If I had longer, I would explore the displays, which feature the landscape and history of the area. There are details of fossils and an ancient meteor crater, stories of peat work and the Kildonan gold rush, drawings of the aurora and photographs from herring days.

And if I had longer, I would have stopped off too in Dunbeath, the birthplace of the writer Neil M Gunn. I've been reading *Highland River*, dedicated to his brother John, a physics graduate. It's a hauntingly beautiful book, which suggests that the physicist and the fisherman are searching for the same thing, something far and deep, beyond the waves and the wind. He describes how they share a discipline of thought, which for the fisherman comes from traffic with the sea, and looking ahead into the distance. 'A seaman's eyes develop a far-sighted steadiness, through which the waves seem to roll and wash.'

Monday 31 July

Bright sunshine in North Ronaldsay for the start of the island's second Sheep Festival. A drystone dyke, over 12 miles long, encircles the island, confining the native seaweed-eating sheep to the shore. The people of the island manage the sheep and maintain the dyke in a communal system, but heavy storms have caused an extent of damage that is proving too much for them. So volunteers from across Britain have come north, to spend a fortnight in the island, dyke-building by day and in the evenings enjoying a festive programme of social activity. The area where they're working has seen a whole section of dyke flattened by the waves, and the line of the dyke is now being moved a short distance back, to a securer position.

Larger stones are brought for the foundation and then the builders get under way, while the others bring a steady supply of stone from the shore. There are discussions along the way, and every now and then a pause to look out over the sea, turquoise over a sandy bed in the bay, and the waves coming in soft and white. Several seals are undecided about whether to stay on the warm rocks in the sun or slide off into the water. There is the sound of seabirds and the sight of bright flowers; and then looking round, the dyke has moved a

stage higher, and the builders are running out of stone – and the speed of the carriers moves up a notch as they respond.

By the end of the day, there is an impressive sight of the length of dyke completed; and a hot shower and a late-afternoon seat in the sun are a great joy, with the evening meal and music to follow. The sheep are used for meat and wool, with the clip spun in the island's wool mill, using specialist machinery sourced from Prince Edward Island. There is a bird observatory, a lighthouse, and a long history depicted in the archives in one of the churches. The island is working on an application for international dark skies status, and is also hoping to appoint a community development officer in some months' time, and is hoping that someone with a young family will apply.

SCIENCE AND NATURE

The unnatural history of spiders

Christopher Small

1995

In the world of spiders, everyone is a spider. Of spiders, large and small, there are many different kinds, but in their spiderhood they are all alike, and they are alone in their world. Other creatures cohabit this world, but these are not recognised by spiders as anything but a source of nourishment. It is not necessary for spiders that anything should have existence until it is caught in a spider's web and ready for the vital juices to be sucked out of it. The relation between spiders and other creatures is of one kind only: to catch and to be caught, to be juice and to drink the juice. It may even happen that a spider himself is no longer recognised as such, when the same fate overtakes him. But, for spiders, he has already ceased to exist as a fellow-creature before he is entangled, rendered quiet, and sucked dry.

The spiders spend their time spinning webs. This ceaseless activity is not only their means of obtaining food or, as the common spider-phrase expresses it, 'getting a living'. It is also their reason for living. It is the complete and all-embracing purpose and justification of life. From dawn to dusk, and often through the night – for spiders sleep little, regarding repose which is not also a lying-in-wait as a waste of time – they labour in constructing, repairing, and extending their webs. These are of ingenious and elaborate but also highly conventional form, the variations imposed by place and extent – for spider-webs may be as different from one another as spiders are in superficialities of size and colour – being governed by the same formal rules of measurement and ratio, and all exhibiting the same fundamental design.

A spider's web is a system of extending rays connected by a series of circles, one within the other, diminishing inwards towards the point where all the radials meet. It is there, at the centre, that the owner and maker of each web usually sits, waiting. At times a spider may lurk, less visibly, on the perimeter, though always in touch with the web. It is the web's centre that governs its form. A collection of web consists therefore of so many separate, identical points, suspended in space, and drawing everything of interest in to the unique, individual, identical hub of consumption.

Very rarely, and only (as spiders believe) by malign intervention, a web may not conform to this pattern, may be in some way irregular, not subject to established measure and proportion. Such ill-made, aberrant webs are treated as a sign of grave disorder. Their makers are, in common parlance, described as mad. The more learned spiders consider that afflictions of this kind must be due to alien influences, perhaps a poison other than that which spiders themselves secrete; that those afflicted should not be morally condemned. In practical terms, however, it makes no difference, since the makers of lopsided and misshapen webs have already placed themselves outwith true spider nature. No more are

they considered to be spiders, which is to say, simply, that they are no more; and, again, it is not long before they are caught, restrained, and reduced to empty shells.

The webs of the orthodox, though always essentially the same, serving the same purpose, are adaptable to almost any situation. There is hardly a rock, a brand, a twig, a leaf, a flower, a blade of grass, a ruin, to which some part of a web may not be attached, to be connected by a thread, exactly calculated, to some other anchorage. Thus, the infinitely varied objects of this earth, if they afford suitable vantage points upon which the web-maker can lay hold, are reduced to one significance only, namely as supports of the web. The world of spiders consists entirely of places, or objects, which can be connected by webs. If there is anything conceivable besides, it has no place in their universal scheme. Everything in this world is connected to everything else – by spider-webs. If they are not so connected, they are not there at all. They are not.

Restricted in this way by unvarying rule, the world of spiders continues nevertheless to grow. It does so by the simple contiguous multiplication of webs, but also by the adventures of young spiders who, having no established web or web-connections of their own, are obliged to seek them elsewhere. They launch themselves into the air on a single thread, or float, which carries them far from the scene of their early nurture, and even beyond the acknowledged bounds of the spiders' world. Upon these threads of speculation, as they are called, whole generations of newly-hatched spiders float in the void, sustained by hope or, perhaps, in a condition of insensibility. So they may travel great distances until they find some new, unused points of attachment; when, restored to activity and purpose, they immediately commence the spinning of new webs where webs have never been before. Thus is the world enlarged over land and sea; even within the sea, for there are known to be water-spiders whose work, of unknown extent, is carried on out of sight.

Spiders do not conceive of any world, in the past or yet to come, but their own. Nevertheless, within its all-sufficient bounds, at every stage – by definition, complete – it may be seen to change, if only in one direction. Spider-webs proliferate and spread ever further and deeper, using up every chink and cranny and then building upon themselves. Once the webs, wet with dew, trembled in the wind and sparkled in the morning sun. But now they fold themselves upon themselves, layer on layer, enwrapping and smothering everything in sight. The web moves not at all, except in the invisible motion of its increase.

It seems, indeed, that the web itself is the governor of this world and the spiders who have built it are merely slaves. The web grows, so it seems, by its own laws, which the spiders are obliged to obey. All objects animate and inanimate are covered by cobwebs, overlapping and interwoven to a single fabric. The light itself is shut out. Inside the web, the spiders no longer see the sun. Their many eyes are useless; all sensation is conveyed to them only by vibrations of the web.

This web is entirely imaginary. It is less than gossamer; it has no real substance at all. Is there an imaginable wind to blow it away?

In praise of accidents

Sir James Black in conversation with Kenneth Roy

2003

Nobel prize winner, Sir James Black, FRS, inventor of the beta-blocker, in conversation with Kenneth Roy

How did you end up as a man of science?

Like most things in life, by accident. I was number four in the family and number three had gone to St Andrews to do medicine, so I had access to his textbooks. One of these was called *The Living Body* and it was a textbook of physiology. I thought it was the most wonderful thing. My father had funded the other three boys – a huge economic burden. I would never have got to university if I hadn't won a scholarship.

You have admitted to being a daydreamer as a child. Did you ever stop being a daydreamer?
I have never stopped.

Is an inventor a daydreamer perhaps by necessity?

I think you spend most of the time inside your own head.

And out of that head came a beta-blocker. I'm not sure what it is. Will you explain in simple language?

In 1952, I was working on the physiology of circulation when my father had a couple of heart attacks. The one he died from occurred 24 hours after a car accident. A trivial accident, but physiologically it wasn't trivial. I'm thinking of stress. In the living body, the sympathetic nerves are there to help us through emergencies. So it was natural to imagine that something which you need to get through emergencies can't do bad things to you. That's true if you're healthy. But if you are putting this emergency system into a heart with damaged blood vessels, it is a different matter.

What I wanted to do was to protect the heart from adrenaline. At that time, there were drugs which blocked the actions of adrenaline. We knew that they would stop the blood pressure rising, and make it fall. In fact, if you took one of those drugs standing up, you fainted because you needed the sympathetic nerve system to keep your blood vessels fighting back. We also knew that, with these drugs, when you stood up your heart beat fast, so you weren't blocking the effect of the drug.

Then I had an accident and I came across this beta business. Life is played as a series of accidents. When you get your accidents, grasp them with both hands.

My accident: in a book called *Pharmacology and Medicine* there was a chapter by a

scientist named Raymond Ahlqvist promoting his idea that adrenaline acts on tissues in two different ways. Some tissues respond by alpha-receptors, some by beta-receptors. So the things that make your blood pressure go up are alpha-receptors and the things that make your heart pump fast are beta-receptors. It was obvious what I wanted.

He published this paper in the 1940s. He thought he had made an invention – something that hadn't been done before. He hadn't, he had made a discovery. He discovered that there were two different genes. One gene that makes the protein of the beta-receptor and one that makes the protein of the alpha-receptor.

As a result of this accident, as you call it, many people's lives have been lengthened. Do you believe that science will go on prolonging human life?

I don't know about prolonging it.

Well, people are living a great deal longer.

Don't bank on it lasting.

Why not? George Bernard Shaw believed that eventually man will live for 300 years. Do you think that's possible? Or desirable?

I don't think that the duration of life is the most important thing. The most important thing is the life you have while you are alive.

So you wouldn't be against prolonging life?

What for?

To enjoy it.

Then you are going to crowd out young people.

Can you imagine someone 150 years old and looking and acting that age but still being able to live?

Neanderthal man is the most successful species that has ever lived on this planet, and for 250,000 years he was in every corner of this planet. And then we had the notion of mutation and the start of Homo sapiens. Within a comparatively short time – tens of thousands of years – Neanderthal man had gone and Homo sapiens had taken over. The one fact – it could still be disproved, but it hasn't been yet – is that Neanderthal man over the age of 40 has never been found. Whereas, with the three score years and 10, the grandmother or the mother is living alongside her daughter and is able to say: 'Look, darling, we tried that and it didn't work'.

The essence of the three score years and 10 was education. Not having to re-learn each time. Now that's what we are programmed for. We are programmed for three score years and 10. To what extent can we improve on that? Nutrition. Do you know that one in three

people in America now have diabetes or are going to get it? When you get diabetes, we can protect you to some extent, but we can't stop you from dying young. There is an epidemic of diabetes associated with how we cook food and what food we eat.

Do you think that today's men and women aspire to idealism as much as they used to? The young don't appear to be as interested in great causes.

You haven't been listening to them.

Well, they don't formalise their concern for the world.

I think the human spirit is something you can destroy. Essentially, it is a question of opportunity. My message is a simple one. I call it a principle of obliquity, although I don't quite know what I mean. I'll try and explain. There are some things in life which you don't aim for. They are extras. I have seen people go into business and make decisions calculated to make money, and yet they have made a mess. When you see people aiming for something, it often doesn't work. I don't think you can plan your life. I think things happen and when they do, you have to seize the day.

Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions?

I had a passion for music. When I was 14, I got a beautiful new piano and the action on it was terrific. And along with it I got a beautiful music teacher. I fell in love with her. And, from the ages of 14 to 16, I practised hours every day to impress this woman. When we moved I gave up and I regret that I haven't maintained this interest.

When you look back on your life from your death-bed, what will determine in your mind whether you have succeeded or failed?

I live most of my time inside my head struggling with problems. I am not out there regarding myself.

Sir James Black died in 2010

A force for humility

Geoffrey Boulton

2006

The perception of science by many in Western societies is of an arrogant enterprise, convinced of its own certainties, one that impacts massively on our lives, but is conducted away from the public gaze: that it is a materialistic, inhumane perversion that is part of the problem rather than the solution. My counterpoint is that science is concerned with uncertainty, not certainty; its discoveries are conducive to humility, not arrogance; it needs to be recaptured as a public, not a mandarin enterprise; and that unless it is, the human species will be unable to cope with the problems that it now faces.

Scientific understanding has been a force for human humility. It has dealt four great blows to our overweening self-esteem.

Copernicus showed that our Earth was not at the centre of the universe, but a minor planet in an insignificant star system at the edge of a small galaxy.

Edinburgh's James Hutton showed that we were late on the scene, on an Earth 'without vestige of a beginning, without prospect of an end'; whilst Mark Twain satirised our pretensions with 'anybody can tell that the skim of paint on top of the pinnacle of the Eiffel Tower is what the tower was built to support'.

Darwin showed that we were the outcome of chance happenings driven by indirect processes.

And most recently, the collective international scientific effort has demonstrated that far from being caring custodians of the planet, we have changed and pillaged it to the extent that humanity has become as powerful a geological agent as the oceans, rivers and ice sheets combined, upsetting the self-organised Earth system, and with the potential to bring apocalypse down upon itself.

One of the objectives of natural science has been to provide an exact picture of reality; to discover truth. One of its greatest achievements is to show that this is impossible. Some philosophical beliefs and many religious dogmas have claimed that they have a special route to certainty that does not require observation or experiment. When people believe that they have absolute knowledge, with no text in reality, they open the door to tragedy. As Jakob Bronowski claimed, in his powerful and moving BBC film, *The Ascent of Man*, it is the road to Auschwitz.

The development of modern science in the 17th century was based on observation and experiment. Nothing was to be accepted unless there was an empirical reason for believing that it might be true, and such beliefs (theories) were to be subjected to experimental tests. *Nillius in verba* (words are empty, in my very free translation) was taken as the motto of the new Royal Society, born of the Enlightenment in 1660. Experiment was the cornerstone of

the new science, but it revealed two unexpected insights that we could regard as scientifically-derived ethics:

Firstly, from the classic work of Gauss (he of the 'normal distribution') that errors are an intrinsic part of experiment and that, in his words, 'errors are an inextricable part of human understanding'.

Secondly, that experiments cannot prove general truths, but they can show statements to be untrue: you can't prove but you can disprove. As Berthold Brecht wrote, 'the aim of science is not to open the door to infinite wisdom, but to set a limit to infinite error', and as Thomas Henry Huxley, Darwin's bulldog, characterised the frequent agony of the experimental process, 'a beautiful theory slain by an ugly fact'. A beautiful theory of mine was slain several years ago. Fortunately, the ugly fact was also mine.

Although error and uncertainty are intrinsic to science, it does make progress, by experimentally disproving the erroneous and narrowing down the range of the possible. Will we ever know it all? No. The outcome of creative research is to pose at least two questions where only one grew before. It is like creating a clearing in an infinite forest. The bigger the clearing, the more trees you can see.

It is the creative, unlikely, imaginative leaps that open up the most powerful insights, the biggest opportunities. As Peter Medawar, a scientific hero of mine, who received a Nobel prize for inventing immunology, wrote, 'we all have colleagues whose minds are so full of the means of refutation, that not a single original idea can enter in'. The most powerful ideas often come from nowhere, are quite unexpected, and often come from the young who do not know enough to restrain their wild ideas.

The unpredictability of scientific discovery is illustrated by a commission of the best US scientists and industrialists brought together by President Roosevelt in 1937 to advise on the most likely innovations of the succeeding 30 years. Not only did they identify many unrealised technologies, but they missed nuclear energy, lasers, computers, xerox, jet engines, radar, sonar, antibiotics, pharmaceuticals, the genetic code and many more. The fallibility of scientists in anticipating the future is as strong as anyone else's, and we should certainly ban the words 'never' or 'impossible'.

Remember the words of the chairman of IBM in 1945, 'there is a world market for no more than 15 computers'; of the UK Astronomer Royal in 1956, 'space flight is hokum'; of the US Surgeon General in 1967, 'we can now close the book on infectious diseases'; and of the great and good Lord Kelvin in 1895, 'heavier than air flying machines are impossible'. Shortly after, we had laptops, Yuri Gagarin, AIDS and the Wright brothers.

So why do governments fund this creative, often anarchic, inevitably unpredictable process of science? It is because the raw materials of economic development are increasingly believed to be knowledge and those who embody it. The current unprecedented rate of creation of new scientific knowledge offers novel opportunities for new technologies and new understanding about the nature, health and welfare of individuals, society and environment, and is a major driver of social change. Governments

worldwide recognise this and invest massively in science and technology, which are now in the core of the economic agenda rather than at its periphery. The problem is, can we, can society, use new knowledge wisely?

It is the release of controlled energy from nature that has driven technological innovation at an accelerating rate. It can most readily be measured by energy availability. In a burst of effort, the human body can generate about 100 watts of power. All the slaves at the command of an Egyptian pharaoh or a Ming emperor only gave them as much power as that available to a single modern bulldozer driver or tank captain. Technology has led to our using 10 times as much energy in the 20th century as in the 100 centuries since the dawn of agriculture: one of our triumphs, and possibly our greatest tragedy.

Rolling back the Enlightenment

But whilst the spirit of the Enlightenment, fact-based, sceptical, analytic, with unavoidable uncertainties that force one step back between two steps forward, has brought undoubted benefits to humankind (we are healthier, better fed with a greater life expectancy), that spirit is being undermined.

Affluent Western societies, particularly in Europe, have become fearful of change, resistant to technological innovation, suspicious of scientific explanation and its inevitable uncertainties, and influenced by growing global fundamentalism, all at a time when we are beginning to recognise the potentially dire consequences of the human assault on our planetary life support system. Science is deeply implicated in these conflicting currents, whose outcome is unclear and awaits historians of the future.

A first, deep tension is about the nature of understanding. Many people and institutions find the questioning and uncertainties of rational inquiry to be less comfortable than the certainty of fundamentalist dogma and revelation. Debora McKenzie has suggested that across cultures and countries, many people are scandalised by pluralism and tolerance of other faiths, non-traditional gender roles, reliance on reason rather than divine revelation, and democracy, which grants power to people rather than to God.

Few of these fundamentalist beliefs are grounded in the mainstream of the religions that they profess. Fundamentalist Christianity is as irrelevant to Christian theology as it is to science. Fundamentalist Islam finds little sanction in the Koran. Such fundamentalisms deny the very validity of much rational inquiry, with a fierce determination to overthrow the materialist method of science and reason, with the creationist campaign its spearhead.

In contrast, European, post-Reformation theology accommodated its faith to growing scientific understanding by allocating them to different domains of faith and of reason. It is not true, however, to assume that science is materialistic and religion concerned with the immaterial. Gravity is not material and cannot be observed. It is a postulate. But it is a postulate that can be tested, and potentially falsified. A scientist may believe in God, but as a postulate it cannot be tested. We can make predictions about the action of gravity: we cannot make predictions about the action of God.

The claim of science to describe reality has also been under attack from some social scientists with the view that all knowledge is a social construct, and therefore that no one 'narrative' of reality is of greater legitimacy than any other (is such a social scientist who flies in an aeroplane logically a hypocrite?). Whilst what we choose to study and how we study may be 'value-laden', I adhere to Max Planck's assertion that 'There is a real world independent of our senses: the laws of nature were not invented by man, but forced upon him by the natural world', and side with Richard Feynman's half-flippant comment that 'philosophers of science are as helpful to scientists as ornithologists are to birds'.

A second tension is about why and how we use new knowledge, and who decides? In the competitive world of globalisation, where new ideas, processes and new technologies can be communicated and implemented with unprecedented speed, the capacity of a society both to create and introduce beneficial innovation is vital to its economic success and its social and cultural vitality. A society that fails to create new intellectual capital or is unable to decide upon the trajectory of change will be a derivative society, dependent upon inspiration from elsewhere and unable to play a full role in global development. The challenge for Scotland, as for other countries, is to stimulate and use its talents, particularly those of scientists and technologists, as a powerful resource for economic development, which is historically the bedrock on which social and cultural development depend.

However, that same science has come to be regarded with suspicion. It is seen as deeply implicated in technological developments that have powerful capacities to influence our lives but which are introduced without our consent and do not sit easily with public values. The public is sceptical about the motives of industry in introducing technologies, such as genetically-modified crops, where the public benefit is not clear, and about the scrupulousness of the scientists in their pay. At the same time, public confidence about the use of science by government has been rocked by crises such as BSE, or long-running sagas such as the disposal of nuclear waste.

Governments have failed to engage with the public, at times affecting a lofty disdain or protesting reliance on the mandate of the ballot box, and scientists have failed to engage with the public, sometime with equally lofty protestation of superior knowledge. Both have been impediments to the creation of policies that command public support.

In a modern society that has lost the habit of deference and where as much expertise lies outwith government as within, the problem of public consent is real. It cannot readily be side-stepped by a quick fix or political sleight of hand. Policy-making in many science-driven areas has consequently become problematic. We are losing the capacity to make the decisions that society needs to make if it is both to be competitive in a competitive world and to be a leading collaborator in a collaborative world facing global challenges.

We need to recapture science as a public enterprise. To recognise that science must not be a private, laboratory cult, but a crucial part of our attempt to understand the world that we live in and our part in it, and in determining the actions we must take to improve it. Sadly, as is our tendency, we have fallen prey to the cult of the expert, who is dragged out

on the *Today* programme to explain to us what we should think, then ritually mocked in the newspapers. We need to rediscover an independent-minded 'democratic intellect', to act as engaged citizens in a common pursuit.

The existing processes of representative democracy find it difficult to deal with such issues. The times demand a cultural change within government and society, in adopting new processes of public engagement, whereby difficult issues driven by the dynamic of scientific discovery can be dealt with in ways that command greater public consent. The engagement of 'civic society', which we promised ourselves on the eve of devolution, is still a vital aim.

There are promising examples in the UK, such as in human fertility technologies, where a more deliberate approach and greater public engagement and awareness of the issues has led to measured public consent to processes and procedures that are perceived to bring benefits, even though considerable ethical issues are at stake.

These matters are vital, because of the grave challenges we face: how to feed a global population due to increase by 50% over the next 50 years; how to dispose of our radioactive waste; how safely to use new nanotechnologies; how to address issues of global poverty; how to maintain our energy supplies; and probably most pressing of all, how to respond to the challenge of climate change.

A third tension, therefore, is that between economic development and its global impact. We are not new to warnings of global crisis. Thomas Malthus, in his 1798 *Essay on Population*, warned that the growth of population would outstrip the supply of food, producing a population crash. But he failed to anticipate technological developments in farming in the 19th century, improvements in medicine that reduced death rates and the 'green revolution' in the developing world. *The Limits of Growth*, published by the Club of Rome in 1972, warned of the depletion of natural resources and quoted the 1969 warning of the Secretary General of the United Nations of perhaps '10 years left to improve the human environment, to defuse the population explosion. I very much fear that the problems I have mentioned will have reached such staggering proportions that they will be beyond our capacity to control'.

The prediction of resource depletion did not anticipate the power of technology to find alternatives. 'Only the future is certain, the past is always changing.' Science has cried 'wolf' before, and economists have got used to the assumption that the market will find a way to substitute for exhausted resources. But climate change looks different. We might find it difficult to find a substitute for the atmosphere, and we appear to have intervened in a fundamental way with the fundamental mechanisms of the planet.

We now know that the composition of the atmosphere is an important part of the Earth's thermostat as a consequence of a well-established 'greenhouse effect' in which atmospheric gases trap solar radiation in a way that warms the atmosphere. Two weeks ago, I asked my second-year class to calculate the surface temperature of the planets of the solar system (which have been measured) using the intensity of solar radiation and the distance of

planets from the Sun as inputs to their calculations. They got the wrong answer. I then gave them the gas composition of the planetary atmospheres, and the 100-year-old equation by Arrhenius that calculates the greenhouse effect. This time, they got the answers right. That the Earth is no different from its planetary neighbours is shown by the fact that, over the last half million years, changes in Earth's surface temperature have gone hand in hand with changes in the atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases like methane and carbon dioxide. Irrespective of George Bush's beliefs, the serious scientific debate is now over. We know that the Earth is warming, and that the principal culprits are the gases, particularly carbon dioxide, emitted by burning fossil fuels. The science of climate change is on a firmer scientific footing than that on which the search for oil is based, and there is no doubt about the efficacy of that search.

Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, 150 years ago, burning carbon-rich fossil fuels has progressively increased carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere by 40%, higher than at any time in the last million years and probably the last 20 million years. It has been associated with an increase in northern hemisphere mean temperatures equivalent to more than 10% of the change from the coldest part of the last ice age, when Edinburgh was covered by more than a kilometre of ice (do I hear 'a good thing' from some of you?), to the present.

A major problem lies in the long residence time of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere of over 100 years, such that immediate cessation of fossil fuel burning would have limited short-term impact. As a consequence, delaying reduction in emissions by 20 years, for example, would require a rate of emission reduction three to seven times greater than if started now. All computational models of future climate agree that there is now a built-in trajectory of change with a global temperature increase equivalent to more than a third of the ice age to present shift over the next 50 years. The great fear is that continuing to increase emissions beyond the next 20 years will create an atmospheric composition not experienced since the age of the dinosaurs, possibly creating a runaway greenhouse effect, such as has occurred before in Earth history, with the potential for catastrophic impacts on human society. We have no doubt that the Earth's thermostat has been damaged. We fear that we could break it.

The political dilemma is clear. It is the 'tragedy of the commons' again. The science tells us clearly that we need to act now to hold back greenhouse gas emissions, but unless all countries act in equitable proportions, the virtuous will be economically disadvantaged while all will suffer the consequences of the sinner's inaction. For Scotland, reduction of its comparatively small emissions will have no significant global impact, but where global collaboration is vital and contribution is potentially costly there is an ethical imperative to share in global targets. As the UK Government and the Scottish Executive move towards a major, and hopefully radical, shift in policies for energy, we must also hope that they will be matched by international efforts that will need to achieve a 60% reduction in the carbon content of emissions by 2050 if atmospheric carbon dioxide levels are to be restrained to

below twice pre-industrial levels. It could prove to be the biggest challenge that humanity has collectively faced.

But here the argument intersects with the other issues I have raised. Can rational agreements be made when there is so much disaffection with the 'ideals of rational enquiry'? As Swift commented 'you cannot reason a man out of an idea that he was never reasoned into' – and when even in Britain, public distrust of government and the need for consent will make a radical energy policy very difficult to achieve.

I expect that if the needed efforts are made, they will mark a change in the relationship between humanity and the planet it inhabits. There has long been a dichotomy, both in philosophy and popular perception, between 'nature', which we presume not to include us, and humanity and its artefacts, which are 'unnatural'. We should now discard the distinction. We must recognise that we are now powerful geological agents, and that we have been engineering the planet in the last 100 years, but engineering it in ignorance. We cannot avoid continuing to do so. The search has been for sustainability, but a more realistic view of human history would be that societies have lurched from one form of unsustainability to another.

We now need to engineer the planet with wise intent, not through ignorance. We are not as good at it as we need to be, and we will make mistakes, but we need to learn. The challenges are political, philosophical, social and scientific. I would love to be here in 100 years to see how we are doing. It will be an exciting and bumpy ride. But, of course, as a scientist, I must accept that I may be quite wrong!

This article was originally presented as a paper at an event organised by the Institute of Contemporary Scotland

Darwin in Scotland

P J B Slater

2009

It will not have escaped the notice of many people that this year is a special one as far as the memory of Charles Darwin is concerned. A spate of conferences, exhibitions and programmes on radio and television are taking place in his honour, and many more books are being added to shelves already pretty full with those both by and about him. The reasons are twofold: he was born 200 years ago, on February 12 1809, and it is 150 years since his great work, *On the Origin of Species*, was published.

Darwin was not honoured by the nation in his lifetime: were it not for his honorary LLD from Cambridge, he would have died simply Mr Darwin FRS. He suffered from chronic ill-health and, after his return from the voyage of the *Beagle* and marriage to his cousin Emma Wedgwood, ventured rather seldom from their home at Down House in Kent. Yet he received a state funeral when he died and was buried in Westminster Abbey. Few biologists would now dissent from the view that *The Origin* is the most important book ever published in their subject. That large numbers of people fail to accept its message says more for their lack of biological education than for the existence of room for doubt.

Darwin was very much an English gentleman, his father a doctor who lived outside Shrewsbury, his mother a member of the Wedgwood pottery family. Apart from his five years on the *Beagle*, much of his life was spent in Kent. So where does the Scottish connection come in? It does so in two interesting ways. First, from periods of time that he spent in Scotland and their influence upon him, and second, through the intellectual precursors that he had north of the border. Nothing in this world is new and, while Darwin described the theory of evolution by natural selection in great detail and amassed a huge amount of evidence for it, there are earlier glimpses of similar ideas, and several of their authors were Scots.

Charles Darwin's first period in Scotland was in 1825-27, when he spent some 18 months studying medicine in Edinburgh. His elder brother Erasmus, who was in Cambridge also studying medicine, was able to spend a period doing hospital work in Edinburgh and the two of them shared lodgings at 11 Lothian Street, a building now demolished but perhaps appropriately, replaced by new natural science galleries of the Royal Museum. A plaque in Charles' honour is mounted above the door.

Charles did not enjoy his medical studies. He was squeamish at the sight of blood and the sight of an operation without anaesthetic caused him to rush from the room. He was far from complimentary in his comments on several of the lecturers. But his interest in natural history was already well-established. He spent many hours on the foreshore of the Forth, venturing even on a trip to the Isle of May, and became firm friends with Robert Grant, an

austere man some years his senior, expert on sponges and with some evolutionary ideas of his own, who later became a professor of zoology in London. So, though he was patently unsuited to medical studies, and moved on to read theology in Cambridge, Darwin's time in Edinburgh was not wasted. He heard Audubon lecture and attended a meeting of the Royal Society of Edinburgh with Sir Walter Scott in the chair. In his autobiography, he clearly looked back on his time there with affection when he commented that no similar honours had given him more pleasure than honorary membership of that society and of the undergraduate Royal Medical Society at Edinburgh University, both accorded to him later in life. But medicine was clearly not for him.

To my knowledge, Charles Darwin only paid one other visit to Scotland and this was in 1838, shortly after his return from the voyage on the *Beagle*. He travelled to Glen Roy, near Spean Bridge, to examine the famous 'parallel roads', three lines that run round the hillside high above the valley floor. These were a source of controversy, some even arguing that they were evidence for Noah's flood. But Darwin thought otherwise: he subsequently wrote a paper suggesting that they were beaches which had become high and dry because the land had risen, a geological phenomenon he had observed in South America. Later studies, notably by Louis Agassiz, pointed to a different conclusion: a plug at the entrance to the valley had sealed in a body of water, and these were evidence of its level at three different times.

When Thomas Jamieson, an Ellon farmer and later lecturer in agriculture at the University of Aberdeen, wrote to him in 1861 with observations in support of this idea, Darwin was convinced. 'I give up the ghost,' he replied, 'My paper is one long gigantic blunder... How rash it is in science to argue because any case is not one thing, it must be some second thing that happens to be known to the writer'.

Neither of Darwin's visits to Scotland was, therefore, a great success. But what then of evolutionary thinking north of the border? Ideas about evolution certainly had quite common currency well before *The Origin*. His own grandfather, an earlier Erasmus, had written on the subject. Others, such as Charles's Edinburgh mentor Robert Grant, were attracted by Lamarck's views on the inheritance of acquired characteristics. But what of the key idea of natural selection? Most famously, this was hit upon at around the same time by Alfred Russel Wallace, whose letter to Darwin outlining the idea is credited with spurring the great man to get *The Origin* into print. But natural selection too had its earlier proponents, though none wrote of it in detail and most shied clear of taking it to its logical conclusion, probably for fear of antagonising church authorities. It might explain varieties within a species, but it was dangerous to suggest that it might go further.

Somewhat remarkably, a high proportion of this band of Darwinian precursors were Scots. The most colourful of these was undoubtedly James Burnett, Lord Monboddo, a somewhat eccentric judge who loved to be controversial and argued for the common descent of man and apes. His main study was, however, of languages, and he was one of the founders of comparative linguistics. The idea of natural selection was implicit in his view of

language evolution and, in his *Origin and Progress of Man and Language* (1773), he argued for a single origin and subsequent radiation for languages and likewise for human races. In 1875, Charles Neaves wrote the following rhyme in his honour:

*Though Darwin now proclaims the law
And spreads it far abroad, O!
The man that first the secret saw
Was honest old Monboddo.*

James Hutton, often credited with being the father of modern geology, was another precursor. He wrote a great deal, much of it not easy reading, but there is, in his *Investigation of the Principles of Knowledge* (1794), a brief (if somewhat ponderous) summary of natural selection:

'... if an organised body is not in the situation and circumstances best adapted to its sustenance and propagation, then, in conceiving an indefinite variety among the individuals of that species, we must be assured, that, on the one hand, those which depart most from the best adapted constitution, will be the most liable to perish, while, on the other hand, those organised bodies, which most approach to the best constitution for the present circumstances, will be best adapted to continue, in preserving themselves and multiplying the individuals of their race.'

William Wells, who was born in South Carolina of Scots parents, but returned to Scotland to be educated, first in Dumfries and then at Edinburgh University, had much the same idea for the races of mankind. In an appendix to his *Two Essays* (1818), he referred to the artificial selection of animal breeds by humans and wrote that it: '... seems to be done with equal efficiency, though more slowly, by nature, in the formation of varieties of mankind, fitted for the country which they inhabit. Of the accidental varieties of man, which would occur among the first scattered inhabitants, some one would be better fitted than the others to bear the diseases of the country. This race would multiply while the others would decrease, and as the darkest would be the best fitted for the [African] climate, at length [they would] become the most prevalent, if not the only race'.

Even more impressively, but locked away in a book *On Naval Timber and Arboriculture* (1831), Patrick Matthew, a fruit farmer from the Carse of Gowrie, wrote: 'There is a law universal in nature, tending to render every reproductive being the best possible suited to its condition that its kind, or organised matter, is susceptible of, which appears intended to model the physical and mental or instinctive powers to their highest perfection and to continue them so. This law sustains the lion in his strength, the hare in her swiftness, and the fox in his wiles. As nature, in all her modifications of life, has a power of increase far beyond what is needed to supply the place of what falls by Time's decay, those individuals who possess not the requisite strength, swiftness, hardihood, or cunning, fall prematurely without reproducing – either a prey to their natural devourers, or sinking under disease,

generally induced by want of nourishment, their place being occupied by the more perfect of their own kind, who are pressing on the means of subsistence'.

If one has a good idea, it pays to publish where people may read it. Unsurprisingly, Darwin had not come across this until Matthew, reading a review of *The Origin* in the *Gardener's Chronicle*, wrote to the magazine to draw attention to it. Darwin replied, referring to Matthew's account as 'a complete but not developed anticipation' of his own ideas.

Perhaps the most successful Scot to have evolutionary ideas before Darwin was Robert Chambers, co-founder with his brother of the publishing house of that name. His *Natural History of the Vestiges of Creation* (1841), originally anonymous but attributed to him after his death (he had a reputation to protect), sold more copies in the 19th century than *The Origin*. In it, he suggested that everything currently in existence, from planets to people, had developed by transmutation from earlier forms. The book was well-written and in a popular style, but not well-argued, inaccurate in many ways and lacking in convincing evidence. Unlike the others I have mentioned above and, of course, most convincingly Darwin and Wallace, he also failed to hit upon the crucial idea of natural selection.

In 1845, Darwin wrote that the author's 'geology strikes me as bad, and his zoology far worse'. In an *Historical Sketch* which he included in later editions of *The Origin* he wrote of *Vestiges*: 'In my opinion, it has done excellent service in this country in calling attention to the subject, in removing prejudice, and in thus preparing the ground for the reception of analogous views'. Somewhat faint praise.

Given that Scotland in general and Edinburgh in particular, was in many ways the intellectual capital of the world in the late 18th and early 19th century, it is perhaps not surprising to find there a disproportionate number of evolutionary thinkers in the pre-Darwinian period. Though Darwin was doubtless unaware of most of their writings when he wrote the first edition of *The Origin*, he must have been exposed to many such ideas earlier, particularly during his period in Edinburgh. His conversations with Robert Grant, and discussions at the debating societies to which he belonged while there, would all have been an important part of his intellectual development. But, in recognising natural selection as being the prime force in evolution, in amassing the huge body of incontrovertible evidence necessary to make that case, and in his courage to stand up against the established order, Charles Darwin really does have to be the most revolutionary biologist of all time. Only by him was this beautiful idea really nailed to the mast.

The hype around science's brave new world

Anthony Seaton

2014

I always thought the word 'hype' was an abbreviation of 'hyperbole', but my OED tells me that it is an American word of unknown origin with a subtly different meaning. This might be summarised by the statement that hyperbole is a figure of speech that makes a point by elegant exaggeration whereas hype is a word meaning exaggeration in order to mislead or obfuscate.

I have in the past used the word 'hyperbole' to describe the use of exaggeration by those both enthusiastic for and hostile to the application of scientific advances, for example in nanotechnology. In such circumstances, scientists serve their discipline better by objectivity. Having consulted my dictionary, I think that the less charitable 'hype' would have been more appropriate.

In the early 1980s, I was informally discussing issues surrounding science funding with an ex-Treasury mandarin who had been responsible for its negotiation, and he told me of his meetings with the physicists, hearing things that only a handful of people in the world could really understand, the handful including none of the mandarins present.

They were, however, told of the wonderful, but quite unknowable, benefits of possible future applications and, in consequence, money flowed in that direction. This ball continues to roll, or rather the particles continue to accelerate, and now most of us remain puzzled over what exactly a Higgs boson is as billions more euros are spent in CERN but, on the positive side, we have micro-electronics, nanotechnology and the web. Big money buys big brains, big machines and, one hopes, big benefits to mankind. But there's the rub.

All scientists deal in uncertainty and know that the outcome of their research lies in this realm. Somehow or other, the expenditure must be justified in terms of likely outcome, especially in the current world economic turmoil. Excluding the necessary brains and machines, the justification for spending on scientific research must be the potential for benefits to mankind and our environment, the planet, its ecosystems and atmosphere.

Crudely, for those who have to make such decisions, is it likely to be cost-effective or, at the least, are its benefits likely to be perceived by the voter as justifying the cost? In terms of economics, big science and nuclear submarines probably give politicians similar difficulties. Researchers, knowing this, are keen to point to positive societal and environmental outcomes to their research, no matter how esoteric. Hence the hype(rbole). A good example relates to the discovery that junk DNA is not actually junk.

Although I only became aware of it much later, it was as far back as 1961 that it was discovered that the genes of bacteria could be switched on or off, depending on which culture medium these organisms were grown in. In other words, it is known that genes

react to the environment. Nevertheless, for a time the publicity surrounding the human genome project persuaded many to believe that most human disease could be explained by fixed differences in our genetic code.

Commercial organisations have started decoding our DNA for profit to inform us of our risks of serious disease, something doctors have done since the time of Hippocrates by the less sophisticated method of asking about illnesses in close relatives. The wilder advocates of the genome project made claims that it promised cures for all diseases and even the elimination of ageing. In passing, it was apparent that those who made such claims had little or no understanding of medicine, therapeutics or public health.

The desirability of, for example, cure of all cancers or defeat of ageing, is at least debatable since we in the West have reached a point at which further extension of life at all cost brings with it further problems. But it soon became clear that these claims were just hype; the human genome was seen to be insufficient to explain much of human variation and disease, and much of the DNA didn't seem to have a purpose, characterised as junk. So the obvious question with respect to the junk DNA was: what on earth was the process of evolution getting up to in designing such a wasteful molecule?

Our DNA has evolved, like everything else, in response to environmental pressures. What have been these pressures? Can they operate over the short-term rather than over millennia? The dominant ones must have come from the availability of food and the presence of competitors, primarily micro-organisms. Like the bacterial diet mentioned at the start, both these factors have the potential to influence how our genes express themselves (epigenetics), not only during our extra-uterine life but also while in utero. The recent finding of genetic switches in junk DNA goes a long way to explain how this works and has profound scientific significance. This brings me to the point of this article. What is this significance and how should it be presented to the general public?

Readers of *The Guardian* in September 2012 will have been surprised to see the headline 'Soon science could make us all as fast as Usain Bolt', over an article by a professor of molecular genetics. I quote: 'The kind of gene-switch medicines that will cure diseases may then be turned to therapies that will allow us to run sub-10 second 100 metres. Physiology, mood, intelligence, libido, anxiety, appetite may all be fair game for the gene-switch therapeutics of the future. Even the signs and frailties of old age may be kept at bay by a careful manipulation of our gene-switches to return them to their youthful state'.

This *Brave New World* scenario, in which it seems scientists hope that from birth, if not before, our perceived imperfections could be manipulated pharmaceutically, belongs in the realm of science fiction; it is the purest hype. Its source was a paper published in the journal *Nature*. I'm sure the motivation of the 442 researchers working in 32 institutes round the world who reported their results was surely what drives all scientists: a competitive curiosity. But since that usually gets nowhere without financial support some scientists, with the connivance of journalists, are driven to make such exaggerated claims of possible outcomes.

To return to basics, we know that the environment is the major determinant of our health throughout our lives, whether through infections, bad diet, bad habits, accidents, psychological trauma or whatever. It has taken some time for geneticists to acknowledge this, owing to the excitement of genetic advance and the dominance of funding for such research. Now there are possible genetic explanations for understanding some of these mechanisms. But I fear that the emphasis on finding cures will continue to hinder the major changes to the health of an ageing, never mind an impoverished, population that may realistically be achieved by public health measures to improve our physical and psychological adaptation to the changing environment.

For those scientists who hope to improve the health of the population, the finding that junk DNA has a purpose is an encouragement; our laboratory colleagues are realising that the environment is important also in determining how our genes behave. We know that we can do something about that environment, even without new and expensive drugs – but do we want to?

The vanishing swallows

Michael Elcock

2016

It is certainly a curious and a useful Thing to understand the Nature of the Weather, and to know how the Changes that happen in it come to pass. The Business is to find out the true Way of coming at this kind of Knowledge, and upon the Principles that I have advanced, it is very evident that the only certain Way of coming at it is by Observation. – The Shepherd of Banbury

My grandmother lived at Fairmilehead, at the southern edge of Edinburgh in a house which looked out at the Pentland Hills. She was a gardener. She might not have known what to make of what we now call climate change, but she had a keen eye for Edinburgh's uncertain weathers, and a constant desire to know what was coming.

Every so often, she would drive her little Austin Seven down to the beach at Longniddry and collect a bag of seaweed. She would hose the seaweed down to remove the salt, and then she would spread it on her vegetable garden. All except for one piece of the big, flat phaeophyceae, which she would hang in the open, stucco porch outside her front door. The brown algae Phaeophyceae was the best seaweed of all for foretelling the next day's weather she said, even sometimes for forecasting two or three days beyond that.

Granny probably didn't know that there was money in her seaweed too; that it could be found in her toothpaste, her bath soap, in her ice-cream and tinned meats, even in some of the printed fabrics that she wore. The Rhodophytas, or red seaweeds, can be worth even more. The Japanese passion for Nori, which is cultivated and eaten, nets their economy more than \$1bn a year. The carrageen moss, packed as it is with iodine and sulphur, is an important ingredient in many beers. It is also found in yoghurt and puddings – and in the Caribbean, it's made into a concoction that's believed to have aphrodisiac qualities.

Near Clifden on the Connemara coast, I once met an Englishman called Smith who lived in a cottage by a long, curved beach. The carrageen moss had made him a rich man, although not a happy one, since he had taken to drinking his profits. As a result, his wife had left him and he lived alone, and spent his days supervising – when he was fit enough – the activities of the small group of seaweed gatherers he employed on his picturesque beach.

'It is one thing to observe, and another to reason upon observations, and it very rarely happens that both can be taken into the compass of one man's life.'

So begins *The Shepherd of Banbury's Rules* – a treatise on the natural order of things compiled in the latter part of the 17th and early years of the 18th centuries. This small, and all-but-forgotten, book is full of the kind of worthy insights that might have been compiled

by chance, the simple gardener who wound-up becoming an influential advisor to the President of the United States in the 1970s Peter Sellers' film *Being There*.

Men of great Reading are as apt to fall into a... mistake, that of taking the Knowledge of Words for the Knowledge of Things.

The Shepherd... spends all his Days and many of his Nights in the open Air, and under the wide spread Canopy of Heaven, is... obliged to take particular Notice of the Alterations of the Weather...

The Shepherd compares signs to events, and relates this knowledge to just about everything that falls beneath his gaze, or enters his mind – the sun, the moon, the stars, the clouds, the winds, the mists, the trees, the flowers, the herbs... and almost every animal with which he is acquainted. These observations, the effects of one on another... become to such a person Instruments of real Knowledge.

The Shepherd of Banbury pointed out that the ancients – thinkers and writers like Pliny, Aristotle and Virgil – who took the time to observe these things, understood well that the cawing of ravens, the chattering of swallows, and something as simple as a cat washing her face were not mere superstitious signs. They saw that they could be natural tokens of changes in weather; that they were behaviours of beings more sensitive than man to the subtleties of pressure and humidity.

On Vancouver Island, the house we built stands at the edge of the forest, far from city lights. An ocean inlet lies in front of it, and beyond that, the Straits of Juan de Fuca and the mountains of the Olympic Peninsula in the United States. When we built the house we gave our bedroom two big skylights, so we could lie in bed at night and watch the boreal rotation of the stars, the movements of the spheres, the passage of satellites. We could tell the time at night from the way the stars sat in the skylight overhead.

With 25 square feet of skylight over our heads, we were conscious of varied wind patterns, changing weathers, disappearing migratory birds, the altered behaviours of resident animals, of late – and then accelerated – growth on our tall Douglas Fir trees, and of other elemental things. Two years ago, there were no swallows; the first summer that we hadn't seen them since we'd built the house 30 years ago. Climate change was a subject of deep interest to us there, on the edge of the Western world.

*A swarm of bees in May
Is worth a load of hay;
A swarm of bees in June
Is worth a silver spoon;
A swarm of bees in July
Is not worth a fly.*

Last year, there were hardly any bumble bees at all.

For nearly two decades now, satellite photographs have shown blue patches scattered across the Greenland ice surface. It took scientists a while to figure out that they represent meltwater; ice liquefying at the surface of the ice cap and funnelling down thousands of metres in cascades of millions of gallons per minute to the bedrock that lies deep beneath the ice. From there, the meltwater makes its way to the ocean, all the while eroding the ice at the base of the ice cap; accelerating the flow of Greenland's glaciers to the sea.

If the southern ice dome melts on Greenland, the level of the North Atlantic will rise, some say as much as three feet. The implications of this (and, according to the intergovernmental panel on climate change, many scientists consider this estimate conservative) are bad enough. Apart from anything else, it will make low-lying cities like Stockholm, Amsterdam, New York, and even London and Liverpool, extremely vulnerable to tidal and storm surges. But far worse would be in the offing. Scientists say that if Greenland's southern ice cap goes, then the northern ice dome will then be at risk, and it is much larger and deeper than the southern one.

Basic science tells us that the ocean cools when the ice melts, setting up what can be dramatic changes in the movement of currents and wind patterns. In other words, an initial cooling, followed by the real warming of the planet. Newspaper cartoons in recent poor summers have shown people wrapped in scarves and overcoats, saying that they could use some of this 'so-called "global warming" about now'. These cooler summers we've noticed are probably signifying that it's well underway – and once the ice has gone things will warm up soon enough.

So what to do? Scotland has a bigger stake in all this than most places. Because if the Gulf Stream alters direction, Scotland's climate will change, big time.

In Turkey, Greece and some North African countries, they build hot water tanks on the roofs of their houses. Each tank is attached to a simple photovoltaic panel. It's not a matter of economics or cost; the poorest houses have them. On the island of Paros in the Cyclades, I was told that you can't get a building permit if you're not prepared to put a photovoltaic panel on your roof.

In more northerly climes, we can use a slightly different technology to similar effect. An evacuated tube system works with infrared light rather than direct solar heat. It can absorb energy even through cloud. Such a system works well in a city like Edmonton Alberta, which has a mean winter temperature well below that of any city in Scotland. We installed one to pre-heat our own hot water, and it knocked at least 20% off our electricity bills. A small step, but it wasn't hard to take. Add it up for a neighbourhood, a town or a city, and cumulatively it would have an enormous impact.

And more co-operative initiatives are not hard to find. A few miles down the road, the T'Souk native band generates more than enough electricity for its whole village from photovoltaic panels. The T'Souk village is about the size of Carrbridge, or Evanton, which lies by the Cromarty Firth. The electricity the band generates is free – and it brings income, since the band sells its surplus electricity back to the power company.

If we are to change the ways we live our lives and utilise energy, the initiatives have to come not just from our national governments. They have to come from people; from you and me. They have to come as well from local politicians far down the political totem pole; from town councils and regional authorities. The Japanese fable about the hummingbird and the boundless forest fire puts it quite well:

One day a terrible fire broke out in the forest. Frightened, the animals fled their homes and ran out of the forest. They stopped at a stream to watch the fire, feeling discouraged and powerless, and bemoaning the destruction of their homes. None of them thought they could do anything about the fire, except for one little hummingbird.

The hummingbird swooped into the stream, collected a drop of water in its beak, then flew into the forest and dropped it on the fire. It flew back to the stream and did it again, and it kept going back, again and again and again.

The other animals watched. Some of them said, 'Why bother? The fire is far too big. You are too small. Your wings will burn. Your beak is tiny, it's only a drop. You can't put out the fire'. Another called out in a mocking voice: 'You're wasting your time. What you're doing is pointless'. Without missing a beat of its tiny wings, the hummingbird looked back and said: 'I just do what I can'.

Observing without taking the next step is what most of us, and far too many of our governments, do. That next step is the first, perhaps the biggest, change we need to make. So, what wisdom does the Shepherd of Banbury have for us? We have to dig deep to find it, and when we do, it sounds perilously close to lines from the Book of Ecclesiastes.

There remains nothing more for me to do in order to recommend these Observations, but to say... that they are governed in every Respect by the same unerring Wisdom that at first framed and constantly preserves the Universe.

How's the conversation going in Westminster, or at Holyrood?

How can we make science more exciting?

Howie Firth

2017

One of the finest physicists of a generation, Freeman Dyson, said his interest in science emerged from a reaction to Latin grammar and football. His prep school, a 1930s version of Dotheboys Hall, taught no science. Latin grammar was taught by a hated headmaster, and many boys found leisure-time refuge in football. But what about boys lacking football prowess?

'We found our refuge in science. We held our meetings quietly and inconspicuously. All we could do was share books and explain to each other what we didn't understand. But we learned a lot.'

They learned, he says, that science is a rebellion. Scientists are like artists and poets, free spirits resisting the restrictions imposed by the cultures they live in. They challenge existing beliefs, they question everything.

His message is that we must take care with science curricula. Give teachers the freedom to open up questions, give pupils the freedom to explore. But as he wrote in 1990: 'Now the kids are kept chained to their desks and are pumped full of pre-digested science, just as they are in America'.

And that, he says, has had consequences. Britain once produced a glittering array of great scientists: he lists Darwin, Faraday, Maxwell, Joule, Kelvin, Dirac, Crick. But amongst many able scientists today, he says, 'I see only one, Stephen Hawking, that I would put in the same class with Maxwell and Dirac. Somehow or other, the shift in the schools from Latin and Greek to physics and chemistry has been successful in keeping the most original minds away from science'.

A curriculum shaped around teaching facts for exams left no time for questioning. Science has too often been taught like Latin grammar – as a fixed body of facts, rather than exploring the unknown. So those students who are explorers, keen to challenge and question and probe deeper, the future Maxwells and Diracs – they can too easily get bored and switch to another subject.

The natural course of science is to develop like a detective story. The scene is set, and the characters introduced. The tension builds; a body is found. The detective arrives to gather small scraps of clues and probe their meaning. The trail twists and turns; it leads to someone; an arrest is made. But one piece of evidence doesn't fit. The evidence is re-examined, and each assumption challenged – and then comes the moment of breakthrough: a new alternative structure completely fits the evidence.

This was how Johannes Kepler showed that the planets move in ellipses around the sun. He was born in a world that for 2,000 years had believed in a fundamental division between

heaven and earth. Down here we are flawed and trapped in time; up there is perfection and eternity. So therefore, the logic ran, heavenly motions must be in circles, because a circle is somehow perfect.

The planets' squiggly sky-movements were rather ingeniously fitted into circles, by making the centres of these circles describe circles of their own. Copernicus thought this a convoluted way for a god to make a universe and proposed a cleaner-cut solution – still with circles, but with the Earth joining the ranks of planets, and the whole family turning around the Sun.

The man who could decide it lived in Prague. Tycho Brahe had built up at his observatory in Denmark a magnificent body of naked-eye observations. He had his own views about interpreting the data. Yes, he said, the planets go round the Sun – but the Sun and its flock still circle the Earth.

To Tycho in Prague went the young Johannes Kepler, with poor eyesight and crippled hands from childhood smallpox, but with a formidable mathematical ability and a great love of astronomy. Tycho put him to work on the data for Mars, and falling ill, asked him to complete his life's work in tabulating the motions of all the planets. He had one further request, in their final conversation – that Kepler should present the data on the planets in terms of Tycho's own Earth-centred model.

The young mathematician made no fewer than 70 different attempts to do this. He eventually got very close indeed – to within just eight minutes of arc. Now with 360 degrees in a circle, and 60 minutes in each degree, eight minutes of arc is very little – just twice the minimum separation of stars that our eyes can see apart.

So this might do it. Was eight minutes of arc close enough?

No, he declared, it was not! 'Since the divine goodness has given to us in Tycho Brahe a most careful observer, from whose observations the error of eight minutes is shown in this calculation... it is right that we should with gratitude recognise and make use of this gift of God.'

So back he went to the data and challenged and questioned everything – until he faced the deepest assumption of all – circles in the heavens. He tried an egg-shaped oval curve – and an ellipse – and came storming through. An elliptical orbit of Mars around the sun was a perfect fit, and he found he could also get its speed of motion and even its distance from the Sun.

He thereby opened the way for Newton to work out an underlying force of gravitation producing elliptical orbits, and he broke through a mindset that was so entrenched that even Galileo could never bring himself to comment on any of Kepler's works.

This was the triumph and the glory, how Kepler tackled a cosmic detective mystery. But the standard science curriculum has become too constrained for time to tell the story of Kepler's challenges, let alone try out some of his data. There is just time to list his three laws of planetary motion, work through some numerical examples, and push rapidly on to Newton's laws of gravity.

It's like editing down a two-hour story of *Inspector Morse* to a 10-second naming of the guilty person.

'I don't really care how you work out how fast a ball falls if it weighs 10kg and is falling four metres,' was one comment in a student review of the curriculum 15 years ago. 'It's not stimulating and I'm never going to use that information again.'

So we need to find a way to bring back the fire in the equations, to reignite the passion and the determination to sail against the wind and tide. Into this situation came the Institute of Physics, pointing out that the general public is keenly interested in the frontiers of science, in the universe's origins and quantum theory's mysteries – but that these topics have been traditionally restricted to university physics courses, leaving the school syllabus locked into the physics of several hundred years ago.

To change the school physics curriculum so radically seemed an impossible task. But the institute continued to press the case – and now it's succeeded. The Scottish Curriculum for Excellence includes relativity and quantum theory.

But how, we might ask, can physics teachers cope? Teaching relativity has always been difficult, and quantum theory has confusion built in by its founding fathers, with conflicting interpretations still unresolved. If the experts at the frontiers of physics cannot agree, what hope is there for teachers and pupils?

The outcome is fascinating. With no standard fixed interpretation to be taught as dogma, teachers and pupils are free to assess for themselves the various alternatives. And there are signs that they are responding to it.

'Just had a great discussion with the Higher pupils about gravitons, Higgs boson etc,' wrote one teacher recently on the physics teachers' online forum Sputnik. 'They are totally shocked that there are things we (physicists) do not know (can observe) or even understand!'

This kind of response from pupils would have been unheard of not so long ago. It's the sign of a climate in which a fine new generation of physicists can grow up. It's the way they can develop the skills and determination to question existing pictures of the world, and like Kepler go on to create their own alternatives. It's happening in the midst of the huge burdens that come with any change of curriculum, and the workload on the teachers can only be imagined. But, if they succeed, they may give science education the breakthrough that Freeman Dyson has spent a lifetime hoping to see.

Us and them: can we unite a fragmented world?

Howie Firth

2018

As we look towards the Burns season, the message of *A Man's a Man for A' That* seems to be receding in the world. Divisions between us all are coming more and more to the fore, between political views, religions, countries, individuals. We seem to continually divide the world into an 'Us' and a 'Them' – but how is this coming about?

There's one suggestion which goes deep. It was developed by a man who died 25 years ago, who spent his life in abstract areas of physics – but who had a truly global vision. David Bohm was born in Pennsylvania on 20 December 1917. His career in physics started at Princeton but he had to seek work elsewhere in the McCarthy era due to a youthful involvement with communist groups. So he went to the University of São Paulo in Brazil, then the Technion in Haifa, and on to the University of London's Birkbeck College, and he lived and worked in London for the rest of his life.

Those years of travel brought him contacts and dialogue outwith the more established networks of scientists and gave the opportunity for his independent spirit to develop. He challenged established views in areas like quantum theory, where the standard interpretation was that it was simply a means of making calculations, with no deeper meaning. Bohm found this restrictive. He had come to science in childhood through books on astronomy and science fiction, and he wanted something deeper from science than keeping accounts of calculations.

The established view was that you couldn't make a model to explain quantum theory – so he went out and made one that gave an explanation, and a particularly clear one at that. He faced rigid opposition; but gradually others stood up and agreed with him. And his approach has stimulated a process of investigation by others which has resulted in the development of quantum computing. But his achievements in physics were only the start.

What makes him so relevant today is the picture he built of human society, and the underlying causes of many of the tough challenges we all face. These causes, he argued, have their roots in science – in the orthodox scientific picture of the world as a kind of machine built of tiny building blocks. That picture, he declared, is (a) wrong and (b) harmful. It's wrong because deep down what appear to be particles are concentrations of energy that emerge and fade like vortices in a river, and the universe is built out of abstract forms and processes. And it's harmful because it leads to a picture of society as fragmented, and that perception shapes human actions.

'Art, science, technology, and human work in general, are divided up into specialities, each considered to be separate in essence from the others,' he wrote. 'Society as a whole has developed in such a way that it is broken up into separate nations and different religious,

political, economic, racial groups, etc. Man's natural environment has correspondingly been seen as an aggregate of separately existent parts, to be exploited by different groups of people.'

And he goes on: 'The notion that all these fragments are separately existent is evidently an illusion, and this illusion cannot do other than lead to endless conflict and confusion. Indeed, the attempt to live according to the notion that the fragments are really separate is, in essence, what had led to the growing series of extremely urgent crises that is confronting us today. Thus, as is now well known, this way of life has brought about pollution, destruction of the balance of nature, over-population, worldwide economic and political disorder, and the creation of an overall environment that is neither physically nor mentally healthy for most of the people who have to live in it. Individually there has developed a widespread feeling of helplessness and despair, in the face of what seems to be an overwhelming mass of disparate social forces, going beyond the control and even the comprehension of the human beings who are caught up in it'.

That was written in 1980, but it could well have been written today, and with even more force. Bohm's work is about diagnosing the way in which this fragmented worldview has come about and then working to make a change. Given his identification of the deep roots of the problem, he went down to the foundations of science and its picture of the world as a mass of little particles, separate building blocks which have to be put together. He pointed out that there are other images about how the world is made – for instance a glass hologram.

A hologram is made by shining a laser light at an object and capturing the scattered light in a piece of glass. When we shine a light through the glass a three-dimensional image of the object appears. We might think that if we break up the glass, we would break up the image. But no, with a hologram, there is something strange and unexpected. When we break the glass, each fragment contains the complete outline of the original – not in perfect detail, and as we go to smaller and smaller pieces, the pattern becomes hazier and hazier; but it's still there.

So a new way to picture the world, he says, could be holographically. Instead of thinking about many small parts as primary, we should think in the opposite way. What we see as separate fragments may all be aspects of a deeper pattern. A holographic picture starts with the unity of the whole – just the opposite of the picture of self-contained particles, the picture which Bohm says has led to our fragmented 'Us' and 'Them' worldview of today.

But a change in the scientific worldview is likely to take a long time to filter through to the rest of us. So what else could we do? Bohm highlighted the importance of dialogue, of people coming together around a table, working on ideas to seek for solutions. At first, he writes, people express fixed positions and tend to defend them. But if care is taken with the structure of the discussion, then after a time a genuine free flow of meaning begins to take shape among the participants.

'People are no longer primarily in opposition, nor can they be said to be interacting,

rather they are participating in this pool of common meaning which is capable of constant development and change.'

In this way, he says, we may be able to move forward from rigid mental attitudes that are causing problems for us individually and globally. We need dialogue between east and west, north and south – 'so that a truly planetary culture could come into being'. And similarly, a dialogue is needed between science, art and religion – 'in which sooner or later they can all come into the "middle ground" between them, which will make available a new order of operation of the mind with rich possibilities for creativity'.

He calls for a new 'creative surge' to take place in science, and in every aspect of human life. 'Something along these lines must have taken place during the Renaissance in a radical transformation that included science, art, and a new view of humanity, culture and society. What is needed today is a new surge that is similar to the energy generated during the Renaissance but even deeper and more extensive.'

He was a modest, gently-spoken man, who suffered ill-health and depression in his later years, but his aim was always to look ahead and seek ways to heal and repair and bring people together. Given the scope for conflict in the world today, it may be that the time has come for us all to study his ideas and act on them.

Spotted leaves in autumn

Anthony Seaton

2018

This is the season when the leaves fall from the trees, a season I used to love above all the others, but which now tends to bring melancholy reflections on the ebbing of life as one's friends wither and die. But sometimes those reflections bring back rather random memories of moments in a conversation that for some reason have stuck. One such came to me today as I walked through the fallen leaves and noticed the black spots on them. I'm sure you will have noticed them also.

The memory was not of autumn leaves but of spring flowers. My friend and I were undergraduates, he studying English literature and I medicine. As we walked past the daffodils and crocuses leading to the River Cam, I started to talk about plant reproduction. He, his head full of poetry and anxious to talk about Wordsworth (who was then rather out of fashion), asked me if knowing these details didn't spoil one's appreciation of the beauty of nature. And thus started one of those discussions that so characterised those far gone university days when it seemed that rational argument could solve all the world's problems.

It was a time of earnest discussion of the apparent division between science and art, as we all became specialised in one or the other, those on the arts side thinking that we scientists needed a proper education, while we lamented their lack of scientific understanding.

I don't remember how our discussion ended, but I expect it continued after supper in a pub and eventually solved apartheid and the Middle Eastern problems post-Suez. But the initial question has stuck in my head for over 60 years. There is beauty beyond the immediately visible colours, texture and shape of things, and there is beauty in how they work and how they got there. There is poetry in the workings of nature.

Those spotted leaves also took my memories back to the 1970s, during my first job as a consultant physician, seeing patients with an uncommon lung illness called allergic aspergillosis, caused by a fungus called *aspergillus*. Its name is derived from the *aspergillum* used to spread incense, because its spores are scattered from a structure shaped like that device. These spores are its reproductive bodies which, if they land in suitable soil, will reproduce their parent organism. They are propelled into the air and are inhaled by humans, but only cause this disease in a small minority of us. I wondered why.

Two facts were known. First, the spores are so small that they can be inhaled deep into the lung and, second, they grow best at a temperature close to ours. But this is true of many other fungal spores in the air and we breathe them in also, yet only *aspergillus* causes this disease. It took some years to find the answer. The spore releases a chemical from its surface that paralyses lung defence cells, giving it a survival advantage when inhaled. Its

problem is that it doesn't reproduce in the lung, so its reproductive purpose is frustrated. Why has it evolved this trick?

Lateral thinking will tell you – the spore's habitat is the soil, not lungs; in the soil, creatures like amoebae eat spores. Evolution gives aspergillus a survival advantage there, and lung defence cells move by the same mechanisms as amoebae. Just as with humans on the Earth's surface, micro-organisms in the soil are competing for food and resources. This competition is also the story behind the discovery of penicillin and streptomycin. In most of us, our lung defences are good enough to remove the spores, but if we are allergic or immunosuppressed, the spore may win and cause disease.

What's this to do with spotted leaves? Well, each of those black spots is a culture of aspergillus, resulting from deposition of a spore on the dead leaf, and there the fungus grows to produce more fruiting bodies and spores to propagate itself – unless it lands on stony ground or in an animal's lung. That understanding surely adds interest to those curling spotted leaves.

When will we walk on the sands of Mars?

Howie Firth

2018

On Monday last week, the InSight lander touched down on Mars after a flight of almost seven months. It unfurled an array of solar panels, and mission control in Pasadena began preparations to deploy a robot arm to photograph the terrain.

The main task of InSight is to study the red planet's deep interior, and over the next two to three months it will be drilling into the surface and deploying instruments to measure seismic effects and heat flow. These may provide clues to the nature of the planet's core and how it was formed. But the pictures from the surface will haunt us.

This is the eighth landing, and over the years pictures of Mars have been coming through from the little Mars rovers. We've been able to see plains of broken stone with rounded hills behind, drifts of red dust on broken rock, cliffs and crests of ridges – and it all looks so close that we feel we could be walking on it, feeling the scrunch of the sand beneath our feet amidst the dull glow of the Martian day.

It's nearly 50 years since the first footstep on the moon. At the time, it seemed that the moon landing would be the first of many journeys that would take us across the solar system. But there were just six more crewed landings on the moon, the last of them in 1972.

The years since have produced some amazing achievements. The Pioneer spacecraft showed us Jupiter and its storms, on an immense journey that has taken it beyond the solar system. The Cassini spacecraft flew in close to Saturn and its rings, and icy moons with methane seas. The Hubble space telescope has shown the great sweeps of gas and dust where stars blaze into life. These all add to the great dream that we ourselves might some day travel to where our instruments have gone before us.

The original vision of space exploration was highlighted by visionaries like Arthur C Clarke. The vital first step, he explained, would be to build a docking station in orbit around the Earth. That would be the Earth's terminal for journeys to the moon and Mars and beyond. Supplies and fuel and crews would then be carried up to it by a shuttle service of simpler spacecraft.

The reason for this system is because of the nature of orbiting satellites. The downward pull of Earth's gravity is balanced by the impetus of the satellite's circular motion, an impetus that is never lost as at that airless height there is no atmospheric friction to slow it down. All the hard work of lifting up from the surface of the Earth has been done and the spacecraft can then load up with fuel and supplies and crew for the planetary long-haul.

But that essential infrastructure has never been put in place. Instead, travel to the moon or Mars involves a three-stage rocket system, with the first two stages burning up and falling into the sea.

This is a very expensive way of doing things, and until it's solved, space travel will consist of single expeditions. But solutions are on the way. This is the significance of SpaceX's Falcon rocket landing on a sea platform, opening the way to cheaper reusable rockets to lift material into orbit. It is also the rationale of the Skylon rocketplane, planned to fly direct into orbit. Ordinary aircraft need oxygen to burn their fuel and so cannot fly in space. Skylon's Sabre engine can switch between the atmosphere and space, through a remarkable system which liquefies oxygen almost instantaneously. It's being developed by Reaction Engines Ltd in Oxfordshire. If all continues to go well, the Sabre engine could not only open up the vital first step into space but also revolutionise air travel.

If there can be a simple way to get material into orbit, and even to fly up direct, then it will be possible to build a docking station, and from there to have frequent enough journeys to the moon to build a lunar base, and similarly with Mars, and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn.

The possibilities are immense. We now know that life can survive in the very harshest conditions here on Earth, and that organic molecules can form on dust clouds in the dark and cold of space. It could be that life is not simply a happenstance on one isolated planet, but some deep-seated feature of the universe. What – or who – we may find as we go outwards through the solar system may be bacteria and lichens, or something beyond imagination. We will only know when we go and look.

And to do this is in our deepest nature, for humans are explorers, and without the opportunity to explore we are like sailors without the sea. Bruce Chatwin wrote in *The Songlines* of the great routes across Australia where its ancient people could travel from one end of the continent to the other, and the terrible consequences when people who are natural explorers are confined to pockets of land: 'Darwin quotes the example of Audubon's goose, which, deprived of its pinion feathers, started to walk the journey on foot. He then goes on to describe the sufferings of a bird, penned up at the season of its migration, which would flail its wings and bloody its breast against the bars of its cage'.

And that's our situation in the world today. It's in us to seek the unknown, and we keep trying to find it on however small the scale we are confined to, whether we bet on chances or surf the web, whether we seek it through money or conflict. But deep down, like Audubon's goose, we feel something calling, and new opportunities and challenges in space exploration may help us on Earth to turn our energies outward into a quest for fresh beginnings.

There is an indirect Scottish connection. The signals from the InSight lander are being relayed to us on Earth via two small satellites, brought on the same rocket and placed in orbit around the red planet. The satellites are of the CubeSat design – a modular system of 10-centimetre units, aimed to do for satellites what PC did for computing. Many CubeSats have been made by university students, and dozens have been launched into Earth's orbit for tasks like environmental monitoring. The Mars satellites are formed out of six of the standard cubes.

Scotland is a leader in the field of CubeSats, particularly through Clyde Space in Glasgow, whose satellite systems are exported around the world. The River Clyde, the company say, once built 25% of all of the world's ships. 'At Clyde Space, our romantic vision is for one day this to be true for spaceships.'

Across Scotland, there is a range of companies providing skills and expertise for satellites and space communication, and plans to provide a missing component for the the UK's space industry – its own launch facilities. Satellites are in ever-greater demand, for monitoring environment and crops and climate, and the technology to take them up into orbit will also help a new generation of spacecraft to develop.

If the satellite builders and the rocket engineers succeed to their fullest, then a new generation will be able to dream of seeing, at first-hand, sunlight spilling over the mountains of the moon and the sand on the red ridges of Mars.

Urgent action by all of us is necessary

Anthony Seaton

2019

It is difficult to ignore air pollution nowadays. Not because thick smogs descend on the city in wintertime, causing coughing and sore eyes as they did in the 1940s and 1950s, but because we read about it every day in our newspapers. We read of thousands of deaths, of children being carried choking into hospital, of threats to our hearts and even brains, and of the negligence of governments and councils in failing to control it. We are told that the risk involves exposure to air containing tiny invisible particles and a gas – nitrogen dioxide – and it is strongly urged that diesel vehicles are a large part of the problem. These messages are worrying, most notably to the mothers of young children, but also to the rest of us as we contemplate our cardiac and cognitive futures. And, like all curious individuals, we should ask, is it true?

I must first declare an interest. For the decade to 2002, I chaired the UK Government committee that researched and recommended all the air quality standards adopted by our government and that subsequently became EU standards. All our recommendations were published and justified in short reader-friendly documents. Moreover, I was the person primarily responsible for the concept that the harmfulness of air pollution came mainly from very small, ultrafine or nanoparticles, which is now widely accepted. I thus have an interest in informing the public on the risks from air pollution and, importantly, in pointing out the uncertainties in the science. This is important, since the public in general still believe what they read in newspapers, and misinformation has the effect of causing anxiety where none previously existed. Most doctors are familiar with the anxious who come to our surgeries or clinics grasping a copy of the *Daily Beast*.

How do we know what air pollution does?

Our understanding was originally derived from simple observation, best exemplified by John Evelyn's 1661 petition to King Charles II entitled *Fumifugium*, in which he described the coal-burning sources and their perceived effects on health and well-being in London. Nothing was done about it until the late 1950s, following several notable episodes of pollution. The first was in the valley of the Meuse in Belgium in 1930, when 60 deaths from chest problems occurred over a few days, together with the deaths of many cattle. Investigations showed that coal-burning factories were responsible, together with a winter anticyclone that trapped the cold polluted air close to ground level. It was predicted by the investigators that a similar episode in London would cause some 3,200 fatalities.

Another episode occurred in 1948 by the Monongahela River valley in Pennsylvania, with 20 deaths and widespread symptoms of chest illness reported among the local

population. Then came the great London smog of 1952, when again a temperature inversion trapped the smoke from factories and houses at ground level and at least 4,000 excess deaths occurred in the city over two weeks. It was this episode (which coincided with similar ones in other British cities, as I can testify) that led to the first UK Clean Air Act of 1956.

These observations of association produced sufficient evidence that air pollution can kill people and put them in hospital, to persuade government to take preventive action. They also stimulated scientific research to answer the obvious questions: what is it in air pollution that causes harm and how much air pollution is necessary to cause these effects? This research took two forms – toxicology (the science of poisons) and epidemiology (the science of the health of populations) – both, as the names suggest, looking back as far as the Ancient Greek philosophers. In the UK, the research concentrated more on the former, investigating the relative effects of gases and soot, whereas in the USA, the most important advances came from epidemiology.

In the 1960s, the particles themselves were considered relatively harmless, comprising mainly carbon, whereas the sulphur dioxide derived from coal was of known toxicity. Since the source of the both pollutants was the same, action on coal-burning was very effective and the air concentrations of both soot (measured then by colourimetry as British black smoke) and sulphur dioxide fell steadily over two decades to levels considered safe.

In contrast, in the USA researchers looked at populations and started to relate deaths to levels of air pollution in different cities. They concluded that the relationship was still present at what were considered very low levels; for example, in the London smog, particle concentrations were measured in a few milligrams in a cubic metre of air, whereas the US researchers found associations with deaths at concentrations *below* 100 micrograms per cubic metre, less than a tenth of the smog levels and at a concentration widely present in our cities at the time. And it became apparent that there may well be no threshold below which effects could occur. In other words, in any population there are some people who are on the edge of a precipice owing to some susceptibility such as age, smoking, coronary artery disease, or genetics, and that pollution provides the final straw.

The early studies showed that the excess deaths occurring in pollution episodes were attributable almost entirely to worsening of chronic lung diseases and to heart attacks, and afflicted older people, especially smokers. This led to a conceptual problem; while the association with advanced lung disease was easily explained, how could such minute doses of particles composed of carbon, inhaled into the lungs over a day or two, kill people from heart attacks.

The plausibility of the epidemiology was thus challenged until we proposed that, rather than the mass of particles, it was the *number* that was critical in causing the reaction; the lung reacts to the thousands of tiny particles inhaled in every breath as though they are invading bacteria. The more particles, the stronger the response – an inflammatory reaction in the lungs – and this is transmitted round the body by chemical messengers in a

way that prepares the body's defences. It is now known that one such mechanism is the passage through the blood of small pieces of damaged cells known confusingly as microparticles. Thus, an inflammatory reaction can be initiated in distant organs such as the arteries to the heart or even brain. There is now sufficient evidence to believe that this hypothesis is at least partly correct, and that inflammation caused by inhaled nanoparticles is the basis of air pollution effects.

The complexity of air pollution

Air is polluted by gases as well as particles, and particles themselves may differ greatly in chemical and physical characteristics. The common gases – nitrogen dioxide and sulphur dioxide – are unlikely to cause lung inflammation at the concentrations now prevalent in the UK. However, epidemiology still shows associations of cardiac deaths and some respiratory illnesses with the former. This is widely accepted in the media as evidence that current levels of nitrogen dioxide pose a serious threat to the health of children. If the association is causative, it must therefore be mediated by an unknown mechanism; this is possible but unsupported by toxicological evidence. More likely, the association is due to confounding, since the combustion sources of nitrogen dioxide also produce equivalent numbers of nanoparticles.

From a regulatory point of view, assuming this relationship holds, reducing NO₂ will reduce nanoparticle numbers correspondingly, so it may not matter save in one respect. Burning gas in kitchens is a potent source of NO₂, leading to concentrations much higher than occur in UK streets. It also produces very high numbers of particles, yet kitchens are not (yet) recognised as places of sudden cardio-respiratory death. This is probably explicable; low concentrations of NO₂ are not toxic and the particles from gas combustion differ from those produced by petrol and diesel combustions, which brings me to the differences between particles.

Particles are conventionally measured by weighing the mass of them in air drawn through an orifice that selects those below a certain size, as particulate matter less than 10 or 2.5 micrometers in diameter (PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5}). This says nothing about what they are. Collected in a school assembly hall, for example, they are likely to comprise mainly dust and fibres derived from clothing. In the London Underground, they comprise largely particles of iron from rails, brakes and wheels with very few combustion nanoparticles. In the street, they usually comprise particles from vehicle combustion with some sea salt and debris from the action of wheels on roads. But all the evidence we have on their effects on human health relates to particles derived from combustion, primarily now by petrol and diesel vehicles.

It is ignorant or dishonest of scientists to claim that the effects of particle matter are similar wherever they are measured. Most of the evidence points to a specific toxic effect of vehicle combustion particles from chemical contaminants on their surfaces, specifically metals and complex organic chemicals that can initiate inflammation in the lungs.

What is known about the effects of pollution?

There is no scientific doubt that outdoor pollution by particles can cause excess deaths and hospitalisations from heart attack and chronic lung disease, sometimes in previously asymptomatic people. The risks to any individual are low but increase with age, smoking and other known risk factors for these diseases; because the risks apply to a large population, large numbers of people are at a low risk, but the large majority are not at risk even when pollution is high. However, there is good evidence that the cumulative effect of exposure over a lifetime will make individuals increasingly susceptible to the acute effects later in their lives, so continuous reduction of particulate pollution will continue to have public health benefits. So will NO₂ reductions, though probably because nanoparticle numbers will also be reduced by the same action on sources.

It is very unlikely that ambient air pollution is a cause of childhood asthma in the UK. Indeed, prevalence studies have shown the highest proportion of asthma is in the least polluted areas such as the Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland. However, exposure to high pollution can certainly cause worsening of asthma and initiate attacks. Most evidence on healthy children has shown little or no effect on respiratory health, and even severe pollution episodes in London in the late 20th century had no effect on hospitalisation in children.

Whether air pollution can cause other effects is still open to question. The evidence that it increases the risk of stroke and clotting problems is strong and plausible. There is some evidence that it increases the risk of cognitive decline in the elderly and that it might impair development in children, but at present this is far from certain. Dementia has some established environmental risk factors, most of which coincide with vascular risk factors; smoking, obesity, lack of exercise and, now, air pollution. I regard this as plausible, but through a vascular mechanism. Suggested effects on the foetus are possible but unlikely; many other risk factors such as poor maternal diet, obesity and blood pressure, may confound any relationship and most observations seem to rely on passage of pollution particles to the placenta, which is unlikely in the large numbers required to initiate a reaction. If there is a causative relationship, it is likely to be through passage of inflammatory messages.

What do we need to do?

The reduction on air pollution in the UK since the 1950s may be regarded as a public health triumph, and this has occurred despite an exponential increase in the use of motor vehicles. However, concentrations of particles and NO₂ have now reached a plateau and further reductions require restriction of individual liberties. It is important to remember that *we* are responsible, not the government, and it is *our* thoughtless use of personal transport, be it petrol or diesel, that is largely responsible.

The health effects of further reductions on urban pollution in the UK would be small but significant across a range of diseases, but there is another, and in my view overriding

reason for prohibition of fossil fuel-powered vehicles: climate change. All combustion produces carbon dioxide and, as I show in my book, *Farewell King Coal*, we are already witnessing the effects in wild fires, desertification, floods, storms and migrations. Urgent action by all of us is necessary; getting rid of our addiction to oil and its products is a major part of it.

We must make sacrifices to save our planet

Anthony Seaton

2019

With a group of fellow grandparents, I joined the Edinburgh young people's march and rally against climate change last month. It was heartening to see how many people have now recognised the existential threat to civilisation that climate change represents and that so many are determined to do something about it. But what?

The most common question I have been asked over 20 years of lecturing on climate change has been 'What can I do, it's such a big problem?' It is a big problem, possibly insoluble, but that does not mean there is nothing we can do; indeed, it makes it imperative that we all act now.

Once upon a time...

In the 1940s and 1950s, scarcity meant that essential food was rationed. Shopping involved visits to the greengrocer, butcher, grocer, baker and chemist. Everything came in paper bags, cardboard boxes, or tins; all wrapping was recycled as 'salvage'. Clothes were handed down, food waste was collected for pig feed, socks and clothes were stitched and darned. The only plastic in the house was a Bakelite telephone and, later, nylon stockings.

Children received a few presents twice a year – on Christmas and birthdays. Nothing was wasted. The house was heated by a coal fire and coal gas lit the streets and provided our other energy needs. We travelled by tram or bus and went on holiday by train to the nearest seaside town. 'Prefabs' and a huge building programme were re-housing those displaced by bombing. There were no beggars on the streets and relatively few cars. Under the new NHS, immunisation and TB detection had started to eradicate the serious childhood infections.

The problem of greenhouse gases

Climate change can be explained simply. An increasing human population with increasing demand for energy, food and materials has disturbed the delicate balance between the planet's resources and the living things on it. But this has happened in an unexpected way. Once, we worried about the world running out of the fuels and food supplies that the human population needed, but now we know the planet has enough even for the expanding population. The economic issue is maldistribution and the crisis has arisen not only from an increasing population but also from failure to understand the waste that remains when we in the rich world take what we want from the Earth's resources. This is the reason that what we do personally is central to managing climate change.

The two most important waste gases from animal and microbial metabolism are carbon dioxide and methane, the former derived also from combustion of carbon-containing fossil fuels and the latter from mining and agriculture. They trap some of the sun's heat in the atmosphere, acting like the glass of a greenhouse, so that the temperature rises when their concentrations rise, and this led to the atmosphere that allowed animals to evolve on the planet. For the whole of mankind's time on Earth until very recently, there has been a balance between production of these gases and their removal by chemical reactions in the atmosphere, in plants, and in the oceans. However, for over 100 years we have been producing more than can be removed, so the Earth's temperature and sea levels are rising.

All plants, animals and microbes have evolved genomes exquisitely suited to the bits of the planet they inhabit. When the environment changes, we animals and our crops suffer. Now greenhouse gas concentrations, driven by an expanding population and its lifestyle, are over a third higher than they have been in the past million years, longer than *Homo sapiens* have walked on the Earth. Higher temperatures, flooding, wildfires, severe storms and drought cause migration and death of species, including our own. Loss of vegetation, melting of ice, and methane release from what was permafrost accelerate the process, a vicious spiral of change.

The problem of waste

An engineer designs a machine to be as efficient as possible, so most of the energy required to run it is converted into what it does. My mother planned her family's food requirements efficiently, having a minimal amount to spend and knowing exactly what to buy, helped by the ration book. I do not need to pursue this – things are now very different for the fortunate majority in the rich world. This is explicable by understanding the important difference between two short words, *want* and *need*. Western human society in general has moved from satisfying need to satisfying want. Need is limited, want is unlimited, and the difference between the two is waste.

'I want' comes from seeing in infancy what others have and wishing to take it. It is what drives commerce and explains why the world's richest men and women still want more; it has driven the increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor. Looked at in this simple way, it becomes apparent that much of the rich world's economy is driven by waste, a desire for more and better, for what we *want* rather than what we *need*.

What can we do?

Although the problems posed by increasing climate change seem insuperable, I believe it is not too late to ameliorate them and it is our moral duty to do what we can. Action is required at all levels of society, from inter-governmental to individual but, if we as individuals do not do our bit, we can hardly expect governments to do theirs. Our own actions should come from personal examination of our lifestyles and consideration of how far they contribute to waste, to the difference between need and want.

Here are 10 guidelines:

- When outside the home, try to use the lowest carbon method of travelling: walking, cycling or low carbon public transport.
- If you drive, aim to go hybrid or electric (they'll soon be cheaper) and drive sensibly within speed limits, using the smallest practicable vehicle.
- Avoid unnecessary travel for business, conferences etc, and fly as infrequently as possible. Trains are much more efficient than aeroplanes.
- At home, make sure the house is well-insulated and keep the temperature as low as tolerable by wearing warm clothes. Consider solar panels and geothermal energy if possible. Invest in local energy co-operatives if the opportunity arises. Favour green energy suppliers.
- Reduce use of electricity where possible. Switch off everything when not in use and avoid unnecessary lighting. Think before using hairdryers, dishwashers and tumble dryers – there are greener alternatives. Bring back the washing line.
- Be thoughtful about your diet and limit the amount of red meat, which has a particularly large carbon footprint. Favour local and fresh products. If you are able, try to grow some of your own food or plant a tree or two. Avoid covering green areas with paving or concrete.
- Think when you go shopping. Everything you buy has a carbon footprint. Avoid plastic as far as possible and try to ensure that all wrapping is both necessary and recyclable. But also remember that there is a carbon cost to recycling, so don't buy things you don't need!
- Donate unwanted clothes and other items to charities and others who need them.
- We all budget carefully for holidays. Include consideration of the carbon cost.
- Do not be afraid to discuss the issue of climate change with friends and colleagues.

The benefits of positive action

If you think about it, most people in the world necessarily adhere to the above advice, as we did in the 1940s and 1950s. Their needs are employment, shelter, food and water. In the rich world, an obvious benefit of changing our lifestyle is financial, not a trivial issue if we

consider the likely economic disruption from climate change and consequential harm to the Welfare State on which we and our children shall increasingly rely.

The more generous spirit of those who subscribe to a more modest and altruistic lifestyle may even go some way to correcting the gross maldistribution of resources in our society, enabling better educational opportunities and nutrition for the disadvantaged. Another obvious advantage is better health, from a more physically active life and a more balanced diet, with lowered risks of obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease and dementia. Finally, such changes represent adaptation to a changing environment by a species with the ingenuity to foresee the problems ahead. We shall be better prepared for hard economic times.

Sacrifices

After the march that I referred to earlier, young people were interviewed by journalists who characterised these sorts of lifestyle change as sacrifice. 'Would people,' they asked 'be prepared to make such sacrifices?' When I heard that, I cast my mind back to the year 1940 and recalled that, once before, the British had responded to a call for sacrifice. I listened again to Churchill's speech to parliament in May of that year, the very year that bombs were to start falling around our house. 'I have nothing to offer you but blood, toil, tears and sweat,' he said. He was right to tell us the truth and the people responded.

The crisis we now face is even more serious, since it will affect the whole world and is already hitting millions. The sacrifices required of us are, so far, trivial compared with those made by the people of these islands and Europe in the 1940s. I hope everyone reading this will consider how much he or she can contribute to the effort to reduce the effects of a changing climate.

Our planet's population is out of control

Bill Paterson

2019

People at present think that five sons are not too many and each son can have five sons also and, before the death of the grandfather, there are already 25 descendants. Therefore people are more and wealth is less: they work hard and receive little – Han Fei Tza

Han wrote 500 years before Christ. He clearly understood the practical effects of exponential growth. The meaning of exponential growth is beautifully illustrated by the ancient Persian story about a courtier who came to the great king and presented him with a most magnificent chess board. On being asked what he desired in return, the courtier said he would be content with one grain of rice on the first chess board square, two on the second, four on the third and so on.

The king readily and greedily agreed. By the 40th square, the king's rice store was empty and the king was in the situation of owing his courtier a massive debt – a debt that never could be repaid. With 24 squares still to come, the now impoverished king owes over one million-million grains.

Humanity's problem is that the world's population has been growing exponentially from around the middle of the 17th century and continues to do so now. Back in hunter-gatherer days the food supply was limited – nuts, berries, fruit, fish and meat when caught – and this all kept the world population to around 15 million, if that. The introduction of agriculture allowed for the building of settlements and the peaceful expansion of family life; by the start of the Bronze Age about 25 million souls were in the world, and by the Iron Age possibly as many as 60 million.

When the Roman Empire was at its peak, more meaningful estimates can be arrived at, with an estimated 150 million people filling our planet: by 1650, that figure had reached around 800 million. It took a further 150 years for the population to top one billion but then only another 100 to make two billion. Some 50 years later it was over three billion, and today we are not far short of eight billion (some estimates make this higher). If the present rate of growth maintains, we will have a population of over 11 billion by this century's end.

It will not come to that: the 14th century provides the reason why. Over-population can be defined in a number of ways, but having enough food of a good enough quality to eat is one part of the definition; having access to all energy requirements is another and, finally, being able to adequately cope with your waste is an essential. When the Rand Corporation in America were asked to outline the consequences of a nuclear war, they did so by writing a report on the Black Death that swept the world mid-14th century.

Europeans first met the bubonic plague in 1346 in the Crimea. With an exceedingly

limited diet and with towns and villages simply swimming in pollution, European men and women died in their millions. That it was due to these factors is simply proven by the fact that, although possibly half the population died, it was a distorted half. It was said that the disease had no respect for, or of, persons but that was not true: the better fed you were, the more often you bathed, the more often you changed your clothes, the cleaner your local environment, the less chance you had of catching the condition. In other words, the richer you were, the greater your survival chances. Out of the 120 heads of the European states at the time, only one died of the Black Death: the unfortunate King Alfonso of Castile nobly refused to flee from his own troops when the Black Death broke out in his war camp and he paid the highest price.

But at least half the people alive at the time of the Black Death survived – and, indeed, entered a better world; a less polluted world, a world where healthcare became more of a concern; a world of greater equality; a world of greater availability of agricultural land; a world where knowledge of Latin became less important as local languages took over the pulpit and learning spread.

It will not be like that this time. The potential for global warming was first considered in the 19th century when John Tyndall, an Irish scientist, first suggested such an effect. He did so purely on the increasing amount of coal being used then but, today, our over-populated world also needs oil and gas. And, make certain, the root cause of global warming is over-population.

The global warming crisis is not without hope – but for hope to flourish it has to be on the back of action. And that action cannot be limited to simply reducing our greenhouse gas emissions; with over 400 parts per million of carbon dioxide already in the atmosphere controlling effluent is simply not enough; we have to clean the atmosphere.

Otherwise we are, quite simply, doomed. Even in the short-term, Scotland will experience horrors. By 2050, summer temperatures in the Central Belt could reach 40 degrees and the rising tides will destroy many of our coastal transport ways. Agriculture will be seriously affected and food scarcities will rise – bringing in added health issues. And Scotland will not suffer as much as elsewhere.

By the year 2100, climate scientists have predicted that, on present trends, the average global temperature will have risen by three degrees Celsius. That does not seem much, but the average difference between the mid-20th century temperature and the Ice Age was only five degrees; so three is a lot and will bring horrors in its wake.

Back to hope: Iceland has developed a successful method of pulling CO₂ from the atmosphere and turning it into stone. It can already process an estimated 10,000 tonnes of CO₂ a year by this way: but there is a problem. The process costs money but does not make any. In a world where investment rules, this means that only governments will put money into such schemes – apart from a few charitable sources. Bill Gates has financially supported the British Columbia-based Carbon Engineering Company that is actively trialling removing CO₂ from the atmosphere and turning it into fuel. A similar company exists in Switzerland.

So there is hope – but we did release over 35 billion tonnes of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere last year and, therefore, we still need to control our population numbers as well as cutting our emissions and developing ways to clean the atmosphere.

Bringing down population numbers will not be easy although, if we do not do anything, nature will do that dramatically anyway. There are those who argue that, properly run, establishing world peace and allowing for the advances of science, our world could hold more individuals than it does (there are approximately 3.2 billion hectares of arable land on this planet and, technically, this would allow for over 20 billion people). But we are not going to properly run our planet. Bernie Sanders is one of the few major politicians talking of providing free access to contraceptives to the poorer countries of this world (and was much criticised for doing so) when he linked population growth to climate change.

This is only part of the solution though as one person in an advanced country will use more than 10 times the resources that a person in a poorer country will go through in their lifetime. Taxation is another part; we have to structure our tax system to discourage large families. At first sight, this move may seem to favour the richer members of society, but that situation only points up the need for a thorough overhaul of our taxation system – including monetary incentives for couples to restrict themselves to two children.

As a side-light to all this, an important one though, England is grossly over-populated by any standard and that, ultimately, will have adverse effects on the British economy and will fuel separation thoughts in the other nations making up the United Kingdom. In fact, the overcrowding in some parts of England has led to more retirees settling north of the border (and bringing their lovely pensions with them).

Solving the problem of global warming is immensely difficult but we hold the Earth in stewardship for the next generation. So we have to heed Han's warning and do something.

I'm dreaming of a green Christmas

Anthony Seaton

2019

We all have memories of Christmas past. For me, the childhood excitement of waking to find presents at the foot of my bed, a reward perhaps for enduring the tedium of spending hours making paper chains to decorate the house. A toy vehicle, a Dinky, was what I treasured most. Quite early in my life I encountered another side, as we children visited the hospital where my father worked and spoke to the patients who were too unwell to spend Christmas with their families.

Later, as a doctor myself, I became used to working over Christmas, carving the turkey on the ward while my family tried to brighten the patients' day; even, in those more accommodating times, admitting some of our lonely patients for a few days over the holiday for social rather than medical reasons. There have always been for us two sides to Christmas: the family celebration of Jesus's birth and recognition of the fact that not everyone enjoys our good fortune. Christmas is an opportunity to share with others. Some of our happiest Christmas memories relate to sharing our meal with young Greek, Taiwanese, Chinese, and Japanese families, whose parents had come to study in Scotland.

Although the central theme of family celebration remains for most people, the commercial side has now become dominant. Already in October, Christmas is being used to sell us things. Temptations are offered on all sides – not what do you *need*, but what do you *want*? And very obviously this leads to the greatest festival of waste of the year. I'm sure you will all have thought about this. We fortunate ones eat too much but do not always consume all we have prepared. Children get more presents than even they want, and many toys are neglected after a few minutes. Much of the wrapping paper and many of the cards are not recyclable, neither are most crackers, candles and plastic toys and decorations. Competitions may develop between grandparents as well as the traditional ones between children.

Plainly, Christmas has become bad for the planet. It is time to think of a simpler, sustainable celebration, one which not only enhances the lives of our friends and families but also takes account of the effects we have on the planet and their effects on those less fortunate, in other countries and on our streets.

Every one of us can address this in his or her own way. The most important starting point is to *think* about it. What can I do to reduce the wastefulness of Christmas, yet enjoy the celebration? Can I decorate the house with sprigs of holly and pine cones rather than use bought-in decorations? Can I use a potted tree or buy a recyclable one, preferably from a charitable source? Are the lights I use energy efficient and do I need them on all night? What is the most climate-friendly roast that suits my taste? Are e-cards acceptable? Can I

eliminate plastic purchases from Christmas? How can I reduce the present-giving frenzy or perhaps give instead to those who are unlikely to get any?

I am anxious to avoid getting the reputation of Scrooge, though I have some sympathy with his point of view and he did ultimately repent, so I am not intending to try to give answers to any of these questions. Each of us will have individual views and will face different family issues. However, guidance is available and I suggest that we all search green/eco Christmas on the web. There are many tips online, including plenty that urge you to buy more, so beware!

However, over the next few weeks, let us remember the increasing evidence of climate catastrophe and its effects on the poor of the world. I hope that, in these troubled times, we and our families will be seen to take a lead in making Christmas not only happy and peaceful but also green.

WAR

One man's war

J P McCondach

1997/98

Part 1: October 1940-April 1941

Thursday 3 October 1940

Gosford House, by the Firth of Forth

Now in the unexpected leisure of a half-holiday, heaven sent, let me sing of arms and the man. An infant conscript – three weeks old – no soldier, but a hectic trainee, whose aching limbs have at length recovered from their unwonted abuse of exercise, whose mental and emotional groove, never easily disturbed, has managed to absorb the flood of novel experience, I can take stock or try to do so.

I expected little that was desirable or positively pleasant in the Army. I was advised ad nauseam of hardship and intolerable discomfort. I had no qualms. The universal embrace of conscription, gathering big and little fishes in with gently smiling maw, relieves any fears one might have of personal inadequacy. What Tom Dick and Harry can take, one can take with them. Moreover, I have never doubted my toughness of physical fibre, though no Colossus. In fact, I have found the rigours of the new life much less severe than I had expected. I have been comparatively fortunate in this respect I believe, stationed at a very well-equipped camp which possesses amenities not generally found. It may be I have been broken in gently. I am prepared for less comfortable conditions of living.

As I have mentioned frequently in letters, it is not the hardship or labours of the life but the tedium of endlessly repeated uncreative exercise, the quite unproductive character of the work, which might tend to get me down after a bit. The almost complete absence of intellectual life, of opportunity for mental movement beyond the exigencies of drill, the difficulty of the approach to literature, never before obstructed, the barrack-room resounding always with song and conversation precluding privacy of thought or actions – all this makes Army life an uneasy affair.

Saturday 5 October

The Sgt is definitely not the story-book type; a very reasonable and understanding, even sympathetic, bloke; just a big brother. Like myself, I fancy, no disciplinarian at heart, he is bound to pose as such for appearance sake and now and then bawls us out with some vigour, heaping coals of fire on the more impressionable heads. Generally, he stages a show of this kind before an audience. In the privacy of the barrack-room, he very much resembles a friendly and popular schoolmaster encouraging his class to shine in the term examination, not by menace but by appeal to their finer feelings. He must be a fairly good psychologist, for don't the boys go for it? It's all faintly unreal.

Wednesday 9 October

Remarkable inefficiency rampant. Payment of a battery of about 250 men takes almost all of Friday afternoon, the entire battery standing in alphabetical order – more or less – awaiting their call, so that a man named Younger must wait for hours, while one named Abbot has hours of leisure.

Saturday 12 October

Dalry, Ayrshire

A change of place, but slight change of life – for the worse. I knew Arcadia could not endure forever, and the worsening of conditions came as no shock. Huts for 20 men give place to a huge converted one-storey mill building, brick-walled and concrete-floored, sleeping an entire battery subdivided by brick walls which don't reach the roof. It rather resembles a modern cowshed or piggery. Ablution sheds offer no hot water nor mirrors nor handbasins, but only a trickle of chill water splashing on cement. Water closets are bricked stalls without doors, so that one's only bit of private life is ruthlessly shorn from one and the heads of those publicly evacuating protrude ridiculously beyond the walls like horses from their boxes.

Straw for bedding – sodden by the rain – proved insufficient for the number of palliasses required and some of us are sleeping on the cold concrete. On the day of our arrival, catering broke down and we were fed like polar bears at the zoo, loaves of bread flung to the milling throng, so that one pair of men got a loaf and a quarter of butter between them while a dozen scrambled for crumbs.

Tuesday 15 October

I have not so far cut much ice in this Army: nor do I anticipate cutting much. I am not the type.

Long nights of gnawing toothache in the sleeping barrack-room: turning from side to side on the uncomfortable palliasse, listening to the grumbling, the belching, the random muttering and calling in sleep, watching through the window the darting pencils of searchlights.

Sunday 27 October

Paisley

Coming home has not the joy it would have had. I am self-centred and strangely callous about amicable contacts, having acquaintances in plenty but few if any friends. I can easily recapture, however, the thrill of returning to her – all anxious and solicitous and so quietly happy – a thrill quite lacking now: for what is home without a mother? The others take much pleasure in my visits – especially he, so typically inarticulate, but in little ways betraying, almost pathetically, his fondness for me. For the rest – the creature comforts: the open fireplace and the easy chair, the food one likes, the wireless, the domestic atmosphere

of people and things one knows and loves. But even this disturbed by irritating details, I have often thought family life much overrated.

Wednesday 6 November

Dalry

What a life this is! So full once scarce observes the passage of time. The more or less constant activity of a bodily sort, the various forms of exercise, the daily lecture, divide the day into so many periods that one has scarcely opportunity for ennui except as it were in detached contemplation of the whole. Only at leisure does the vacuity, the oppressively unsatisfactory nature of this way of life, present itself. And it takes its place then in the awful, larger picture of complete and utter chaos and anarchy and colossal waste of wealth and brain and energy that forms the world at war. The war – so far away in this Army, so seemingly forgotten in the process of preparing to take part in it...

Thursday 7 November

We are all so unaware of the larger issues, so unapprehensive and uninterested in the future, so unappreciative of what we are actually doing in the present. The laying of a gun, the function of a detonator, the mechanism of a fuse – these engross; but the ultimate consequences, the original causes, of all this strange study are wholly without our attention. Time passes: on the square, in the barrack-room, the cinema, the canteen, the fish shop, time passes. Leisure hours are easily filled; polishing and brushing, discussing knotty points in gunnery, smoking, eating, drinking, escaping in the film: fatuous facetious ribald loathsome talk and banter: no conversation – or almost none. Few books are read, except thrillers and westerns. Myself have read essays by Virginia Woolf and some short stories. Letters are written, at great length and frequently by some. But the war is ignored.

Friday 8 November

These [Woolf's] essays in literary criticism recall so clearly to mind the realms of gold so desultorily explored in those far-off days and years when opportunity offered. Conrad, Jane Austen, Addison, Montaigne, Defoe, Homer, Brontë: names that really meant so little when they might have meant so much, but slightly known and passed by, not cultivated but readily neglected for all that monstrous catalogue of trifles that make up life.

Perhaps it is better to have no knowledge of letters at all than this passing acquaintance which tantalises by its incompleteness.

Monday 20 January 1941

Ah, those Arctic mornings when we parade in the semi-dark in PT kit! Away we go in semi-nudity, crushing the frost-crusts beneath rubber soles, across the football and rugby pitches, over the plank bridges that span the frozen stream below, and on to the roadway, stepping carefully on the ice-bound surface.

So cold – but the blood soon runs freely and even one's nose and ears eventually come back from tingling isolation.

Tuesday 21 January

I think there is no pleasure in actuality comparable with that of expectation or recollection. The present is always a disappointment, a falling short, a shadow of its imaginary self: actual enjoyment of the moment never scales the height of fancy. Happiness is of the mind, immaterial, a mirage enticing one, never attained, but beautiful in retrospect.

I have thought for some time that I am harbouring a mild form of acedia.

I think again of my fellows in the regiment – friends of four months – brought from their diverse pasts into this grossly identical present, living thoughtless (in the main) of their possibly nasty brutish and short future: and the sordid ungodly casual character of human life impresses me. A moment in annihilation's waste.

Sunday 26 January

Interesting, the perceptible happiness in barrack-room reunion after so brief a separation. Rueful, it may be, with jocular resignation to the inevitable: but none the less real. For this has become a way of life, and leave is a disturbing interruption.

In several, a new or stronger state of dissatisfaction or discontent. John is more than ever disgruntled, craving action that may end this seemingly infinite period of preparation and waiting. Others, mocking their newly-won, much-prized permanent pass, return to billets long before the appointed hour, because they could find nothing to do at home but wait till train time.

Sunday 9 February

Things are beginning to move again. Rumour, which flourishes in barracks, has us in Egypt, Palestine, India, Kenya. Where or when we shall sail probably no-one knows. But we entrain for Woolwich tomorrow, 14 of us chosen alphabetically from Squad 40.

I look forward to this move... Anything new is welcome.

Sunday 23 February

Woolwich

Life becomes more and more unsatisfactory. After seven days embarkation leave – disappointing as usual – we languish here in this cold and cheerless depot, pawns on the board, awaiting the push, when or whither we know not. The mood of anticipation is soon dissipated and one readily sinks down again into the habitual dull acceptance of whatever comes, relieved of course by the prevailing good-humoured grouching.

These are so far the worst billets. The grim, institution-like character of the ancient barracks, so numerous populated, in itself makes so clear one's place in this sorry scheme. Nor can we expect from this garrison town that warm-hearted hospitality found in Dalry.

We are brownd off here: everybody seems to be. We are simply marking time: all training has stopped. For about six weeks now, both here and at Dalry, we have learned nothing and practised nothing appertaining to the military profession. We should have been much more useful to the national effort back in our civilian jobs. I believe a sense of the futility of our present position has much to do with the strong feeling of boredom and disgust so prevalent here. No doubt much careful organisation is necessary in moving large bodies of troops overseas. But lingering in uncertainty and comparative idleness is no good at all.

Thursday 6 March

The night sky brilliantly illuminated by vivid lightning flashes, and in the periods of darkness starred by bursting shells; the whole earth and sky reverberating and trembling with an incredible doom-like sound that seems to threaten chaos and beats you down. From our post by the South Arch, we watched the raiders progress to and from London, marked on the ground by gun flashes and in the sky by shell bursts pin-pricking the darkness and seeking the invisible enemy. Another night, a wonderful display of 'chandelier' flares descending slowly to earth like Chinese lanterns, casting an unnatural radiance all about.

Monday 10 March

One grows used to these nights hideous with sound and fury signifying much. But they are positively unpleasant and disturbing, fraught with very present danger that no amount of jocularly or nonchalant unconcern can dispel. There is nothing one can do to ward off the planes droning above, except ignore or make fun of them, and this one does assiduously till sleep blankets out the noise and brings oblivion. They will be back again tonight – they are almost due now – and many will never see daylight again. It is a chastening thought. And yet, many will never see daylight again whether they come or not...

Fear is not the prevalent emotion, I think, but rather apprehension. The impersonal, random character of the danger precludes fear; as, for example, a bayonet charge or the encounter with a superior single adversary would not – for me at least. Possibly a nearer acquaintance with the effects of bombing or even with the bombing itself may change this.

I was much affected by a few lines from father, whose entire world, I realise afresh and very clearly, has been bewilderingly upset in so short a time. As I wrote to him yesterday, in more candid, less reserved terms than I generally permit myself – such is the unfortunate, inarticulate relationship between fathers and sons – the kind of life I am compelled to lead reduces the strength of family ties, weakens the sense of loss that must prevail with those at home who continue the habitual task in known surroundings. But I do sincerely feel for him, and am brought afresh to appreciate the almost universal heart-sickness war brings.

Saturday 22 March

'Pasteur', off Gourock

Life is most unpleasant these days. These creature comforts recede further into the past – almost forgotten. Tuesday night on guard at Woolwich, an hour or two's sleep in clothes and boots, and up clammy and unrefreshed to pack for travel. Fourteen hours to Gourock, with about an hour's sleep through day and night, nibbling sandwiches, swilling railway tea and bottled beer. Detrained at Gourock 8am Thursday. On board at 10.30am – weary, shoulder-sore, bleary-eye, unwashed, unshaven, viewing this new home with anger and disgust that even the novelty could not dispel.

Sunday 23 March

I become more and more gratified at my slowness of stature. Troops are allotted very little space. Barrack-rooms are bad enough. But our progress through the past six months has been from bad to worse. Pushing, jostling, squirming, elbowing, always in such close proximity to one's fellow men, privacy an almost forgotten bliss. One is never alone, even for minutes at a time, a herd life, a permanent unbroken gregariousness, doing the same things at the stated time in the same fashion. The psychological importance of this is ignored perforce. But the physical, material discomfort is overwhelming and ever present and it has reached what must be, I hope, a climax here on board.

Since leaving Woolwich, we have lived in preternaturally close personal contact, sweating together, crowded close, breathing hotly down one another's throats. On bus and train and tender, and now here on this mess deck – Section O, Troop Deck E, HM Troopship *Pasteur* of 30,000 tones – we cling together like bees in a hive, lice in a kilt-seam, flies on a carrion. The air quivers with heat, which the ventilators cannot even begin to reduce.

Tuesday 25 March

First day at sea. Somewhere in Atlantic

Here in the mess, the walls move gently to and fro, hammocks swing from the beams, the floors heave up and down, the bulkheads resound to the crash of the piling waters. Outside, a grey rainy mist-covered waste of heaving black sea, whipped into whitening crests by a freshening wind. We have run into fairly thick weather, have been warned to expect trouble, and stow movables firmly away. The many vessels that accompany us have vanished into the mist, and we pitch and toss alone.

Last night at 7pm, we dropped down river and anchored off Dunoon. At 10.30pm the anchor was weighed and we slipped out in the darkness, away from our secure and beautiful familiar haven, sheltered by those Scottish shores towards which we Scots had looked yearningly during our idle expectant days at anchor. It came home to me particularly on the very lovely spring Sunday when we sunbathed on the deck how foolishly I had neglected this marvellous firth so near home.

Thursday 27 March

Third day at sea

We have had a fairly unpleasant time these past 48 hours. Myself have been lucky, suffering but slightly: but the sea has been most unkind to many, brutal to some. The conditions between decks aggravate any sickness caused by the ship's motion. The hot smell of cooking and humanity that envelopes one, nauseatingly, on opening the door to descend to the mess, threatens to turn the staunchest stomach. A stay below of any duration renders one fit for nothing. Lassitude, headache, giddiness, a feeling of general heaviness and ill-being takes possession and one is prone to seek the welcome winds that blow above.

On rising in the morning, I feel more tired than at any time during the day. Refreshing sleep is quite impossible in so foul and foetid an atmosphere. Although so far spared the pangs of seasickness, I have not been at all in fettle. Now I am somewhat more settled, with increasing sympathy for the positively sick. Yesterday the ship stank throughout, befouled with vomit: the rail was hung with suffering troops seeking relief: the covered promenade deck thickly strewn with prostrate bodies so that walking was well nigh impossible.

On Tuesday night, when I was on watch above the bridge, the wind attained almost gale force. The sea, dimly seen in the dark, ran racing past us. The wind sang in a medley of keys – a strange, hissing noise like escaping steam, a high, wild, banshee screeching, a louder, lower, long howling – such a natural turmoil as I have never heard before heard. Its violence belaboured us, driving the breath back in our throats, snatching speech from our mouths, blinding our eyes.

Today, a submarine was reported in the rear of the convoy. Two destroyers raced astern. The troops were advised not to be disturbed if loud explosions were heard. No such were heard.

Saturday 29 March

Fifth day at sea

We have been advised to put our watches back one hour at midnight. I reckon we are about 800 miles west of the south of Spain at present.

Of course, any attempt to deduce our position at any given time is made well nigh impossible because not only do we not know the ship's original course from the Clyde, or her speed, but her frequent zigzags and more lengthy changes of course make confusion worse confounded.

Monday 31 March

Boredom looms fairly threateningly. We have few parades and duties and much time on our hands. Attempts are being made now at some scratch forms of entertainment – concerts, boxing tournaments. But all this is pathetically inadequate. The ship's library contains 400-odd books, amongst almost 4,000 troops, books of the thriller type as far as I can see. I have read frequently in the press of the service of literature to the forces – much in patronising terms of the provision for the eclectic and cultured taste of the modern

Army. But I have never found much if any evidence of it. Here, if anywhere, one might expect to find a library – in a large isolated community, so bereft of entertainment, so driven in upon itself for amusement and diversion. Much time is devoted by many to endless playing of the Army's one legal gamble – Housey – a straight enough game of chance, it may be, but depressing and, I find, much more boring than sheer indolence.

Wednesday 2 April

Tropical weather: a high sun overhead whose direct rays strike more fiercely than I have ever experienced: a sea of astonishing royal blue crested with brilliant white – poster colours. The deck is hot beneath our rubber shoes: the carelessly exposed skin reddens as you watch. You perspire without movement or action even in shirt and shorts: the light hurts the eyes and on going below you are temporarily blinded. Accompanying ships are seen through a haze.

Part 2: April-May 1941

Friday 4 April 1941

Eleventh day at sea. Destination A

Today at noon Africa – the dark content – long expected, loomed blue through the heat haze – a rugged lofty skyline reminiscent of a Clyde prospect, but on nearer approach how different! What barbaric outlandish colours, what strange deep greens and russet browns.

Saturday 5 April

No sooner had we anchored than a flotilla of crude cockleshell canoes came bobbling on the calm waters, pushed vigorously along by spear-headed paddles. Light and imperfectly fashioned, these primitive craft move fast but somewhat crab-wise, their occupants finding it hard to keep their heads forward. Mangoes, coconuts, bananas, oranges, sandals, wicker baskets of gay-coloured straw – a colourful cargo which the eager trader casts with much difficulty and astonishing patience from his perilously rocking canoe up the towering ship's side to the expectant buyer. The money or goods in kind must go down before anything swings up and many wordy disputes take place before the bargain is clinched. But I saw no attempt at welching on the blacks' part. Some of them dive for coins – Glasgow tanners for preference – with speed and agility if small grace, taking headers from their canoes and returning thither after every dive time after time.

They have a considerable fund of pidgin English and chatter and sing all the time. *Roll out the Barrel* and the *Lambeth Walk* the favourites of the moment. One boy I watched on the deck of the water-tanker tied alongside. Having obtained a cigarette and lit it very inexpertly, he postured and strutted up and down, arms folded or akimbo, puffing the smoke jauntily into the air, clearly mightily pleased with himself, an ingenuous actor.

Sunday 6 April

Here in this great anchorage it is hard to remember the war and our purpose in sailing. We lounge about the decks beneath the cool awnings when the sun is high, watch the canoes bobbing on the trembling water beneath and listen to the bargaining blacks. The great red sun sets at six o'clock, dropping visibly down the last degrees of crimson sky like a stage prop. The brief twilight slides into night by half past six, with the crescent moon a silver sickle on its back above the main mast and stars appearing in profusion. From the shore, lights shine boldly and fires glow in the dark. The ships in the bay blaze with light, fearing no attack. A cooling breeze wafts across the bay, disturbing the moon's reflection in the black water.

Last night, we slept up on the open sports deck and when I woke before six the sun was well above the horizon. The times seem out of joint. Why, with the sun still south of the equator and we still some distance north, should there be so many hours of daylight? The problem is much too hard for me, even as one who teaches geography, to work out. I have no energy. Mental exercise is quite beyond me.

Conditions on board do not improve: and men grow disgruntled in this heat. Our mess deck, under the galley and webbed with hot pipes, was never meant for human occupation. With 100 men and their kit it is veritable purgatory. Here in port with the few port-holes and emergency water-tight doors allowing some natural movement of air, it is stifling. At sea, with these vents closed, conditions are criminal. Many now sleep above, but even this reduction in numbers brings but slight alleviation. And meals are almost intolerable. Sweat not merely stands out on the burning skin, but runs in streams down semi-nude bodies and trickles from one's face into the mess tin. Clothing is saturated and sticky in no time at all.

Nor is our diet – unchanged since we left home – calculated to lessen discomfort. Piping hot stews and soups, beans and peas on alternate days, dollops of duff, messes of sago, tapioca, rice-pudding, fail to tempt the appetite down in this fiery furnace. Our estimable major says that we should hesitate to grouse about the food when folks at home are living without. It is characteristic of his mentality and Army mentality in general, this notion that we should in some strange fashion be less dissatisfied with our abundance of unwanted food by knowing that people at home who want it can't get it. The Army seems to do something to people's minds.

Monday 7 April

Discontent is in no way lessened by the blatant contrast between the manner of living of officers and men. The ship is partitioned into places officers may go and places other ranks may not go. Officers monopolise almost three whole decks including nearly all the public rooms on board. They have more accommodation for writing in than a whole unit has for eating, sleeping and trying to have its being in. They are attended by a vast retinue of stewards and waiters. They live like first-class passengers on a luxury cruise – except that, dread fact, they sleep four in a cabin – the juniors – and have only one bathroom to every four. We sleep, or try to, 100 to a small furnace-like mess, queue endlessly and struggle in a

small primitive washroom, and reluctantly visit as seldom as possible latrines that would disgrace a 19th-century industrial slum.

Friday 11 April

Last night, from my bed above the bridge, I watched heavy rain clouds race across the sky at remarkable speed. It's strange how one can lie here almost naked with the window howling about and over one, and not feel at all cold.

Tuesday 15 April

Tomorrow we shall reach Destination B [Capetown] and the prospect is pleasing. Land, respite from the ocean ever moving, something to see beyond sea and sky and ships, a drink, a palatable meal, a comfortable chair, maybe a cinema show, hard-paved streets that do not heave beneath the feet, buildings that remain stationary... If only we are allowed to enjoy these things, for life becomes increasingly hard to thole.

Monday 21 April

Yesterday we sailed away from Capetown with infinite regret, after several splendid days of junketing and sunny wanderings.

The hospitality of the people was really extraordinary. Each convoy brings thousands and thousands of troops who invade and infest streets, bars, shops, cinemas, roistering drunkenly. Instead of regarding this periodic inundation from the sea with pardonable disfavour, the inhabitants vie with each other in entertaining their visitants lavishly. Many canteens provide everything free; numerous places of free entertainment – astonishing, unexpected, extravagant hospitality. Messroom rang for hours each night with tales of wondrous wassail and jaunting.

Wednesday 23 April

We had been warned to expect a certain antipathy to Britain's war effort, but I encountered no evidence of it, although I was made aware of a few signs that South Africa was not united on the question of war. Most people I met were wholeheartedly enthusiastic and extremely proud of 'the boys up North', but I only met British South Africans. In *Cape Times* appeared a manifesto by a group of professors deploring attempts at Nazi propaganda and calling for union against all such infringement of democratic principle.

There were signs of obvious prosperity in the city. Streets are thronged with high-powered American cars; sidewalks, cafes and bars with well-dressed handsome people of all ages. There are no poor-seeming whites, nor I believe any European slum quarter.

The black population do almost all the manual labour. Newspaper article deplores low wages of coloured factory workers – £44 per year. General complete lack of sympathy with the blacks among all Europeans, no desire at all to attempt amelioration, no awareness even of the problem.

Thursday 24 April

Our short respite from the lassitudinous rigours of the voyage has but strengthened our extreme distaste for the unpleasant and uncomfortable life we lead on board. The contrast is strong and remembrance of home life, returning among the lights and gay normality of Capetown, looms like Table Mountain over the idle sea of our discontent.

Saturday 26 April

I despair of conveying in words any impression of the beauty of these tropical seaborne days – the incredible tranquility; the undimmed brilliance of sea and sky; the magnificent, snowy-breasted, aloof, impersonal, cloud scenery; the shimmer and dazzle of the placid high-sunlit water...

While we proceed peacefully and untroubled through this halcyon weather, British forces are being thrown into the sea, another expedition has become a sheer fiasco like its predecessors, and the irresistible power of Germany adds one more territorial trophy to its bulging belt. What new field for stirring rearguard action, what fresh place for naval evacuation, awaits British arms, hitherto harried off the continent wherever they ventured? It is hard not to be cynical about these successive, forlorn, foredoomed, ill-conceived adventures, amateurish facings-up to this mercilessly competent professional. The last European battleground has gone unless we attempt some bloody sally from the sea. The ball is once more at Hitler's feet, and we must again await his move. This enemy is proving much too good for our muddling policy, whose principal weapons are faith in the glorious past and hope for the uncertain future. John is certain that some kind of peace will be reached in the immediate future.

Tuesday 29 April

People do seem to harbour the most curious notions about climate, geography, location – people of good education, I mean. Common mistake – even among natives of Capetown – is that round Good Hope lies the Pacific. I heard this so often, I became doubtful myself of its absurdity. For most, too, the line of the equator is at all times in all places the hottest region of the earth. Many believe that climate grows warmer with movement east, that time alters with movement south, and in general, the haziest conceptions exist of all major and elementary geographical facts.

Wednesday 30 April

This war is in a bad way. A situation, always difficult, has deteriorated immeasurably during this voyage. I can't see the way out and I am concerned to think of the reactions at home to the so-changed course of events in the near East whither we are going. I don't like to think of it.

Thursday 1 May

We draw near our destination, presumably Suez, and then who knows? Nearer the war, too, from which we have had a lengthy respite.

Monday 5 May

This will probably be my last entry on this hell ship. We expect to dock tomorrow and have to date held three full-dress muster parades. Our estimable major gave us a pep talk this morning – the most absurd speech ever heard, even from him. He told us that we should probably become front-line troops almost immediately: we should not be despondent, however, nor believe in the invincibility of the German Army: he could assure us (with great sincerity and vehemence) that any of us was worth three Germans and four to five Italians. He had seen the Germans run and by God they could run – even faster than the Italians – so we mustn't get any false ideas into our heads. I honestly believe this most inept fellow genuinely believes what he says – and yet surely not. He is a very stupid man all the same. He began asking us not to bear any grudge against our officers because of the immense contrast their mode of living bore to ours during the voyage. They were fully aware of it, but disclaimed responsibility: we might not know it, but it was instilled into all officers of the British Army that the happiness and well-being of their men always came before their own. He's an ass.

Astonishingly chilly last night after a day of strong wind from NE.

Tuesday 6 May

Off Suez

Here we lie in this sweltering anchorage in numerous and famous company waiting our turn to disembark. The heat is almost visible: the air is quite motionless: the strong covers of this book are curling back. What a desolate, torrid, inhuman spot. I sit and moistly sweat so that the pen slips in my fingers. The heat seems active, slowly and surely oppressive, a positive elemental inimical force. The sun's glare on sea and shore and sky wearies the eye.

Wednesday 7 May

During this period of inevitable waiting, I might attempt one or two general impressions – poor and scrappy I fear, for writing, never easy to me, has become a labour and I seem unable to think clearly...

The morale is low or, it may be non-existent. That much-publicised eagerness for the fray, that up and at 'em, Berlin or bust spirit I have never encountered during my eight months in uniform. But on board it is more than ever absent. The prevalent feeling is one of acute disgust with the war, the Army and everything connected with it; the principal desire an end of the whole sorry business and a speedy return home. Many things may have contributed to this – apart from the fact that it is the only sane attitude. The wretched conditions under which we have lived for six long weeks, the contrast between our life and

that of our superiors, the daily news bulletin of defeat and disaster, the blatant incompetence of officers and NCOs.

My immediate group are probably more disgruntled and hostile than the average, but the prevailing tone is unmistakable. Nor has there been any attempt – if we except the recent pathetic pep talk of the major which fizzled like a damp squib among the apathetic audience – at inspiriting blarney such as one reads of in that incredible book *A Brass Hat in No Man's Land*. For the occupants of this ship, the war seems almost non-existent: no training of any kind, little groping attempts at lectures that never get anywhere, generally a complete official neglect of the situation. When the Greek or Libyan campaign became alarming, the major would counsel us not to be despondent; Britain always started badly. When it became certain that we were bound for Egypt, we were told we should be damned glad we were going to see some action. A few days out from Suez he informed us that soon we should begin to live... This kind of prattle needs no comment. But one does get the impression that so many of these officers and NCOs have been reading the wrong books and papers.

I, in common with my friends and all men of any sense, have no desire whatever to see some action and the prospect of its near approach does not please us at all. Action, under the aegis of this British Army, has no allure. The new scenes and people to be met in the near future will probably alleviate temporarily the present all-consuming disgust that is ours, but nothing can lift up hearts burdened with such a weight of long-term catastrophe. Not, of course, that we sit in gloom all day, not at all. But discussion of the war, news of some fresh failure or of heavy bombing at home, brings fresh appreciation of the sorry state of things, quite devoid of any hope of moderately successful conclusion. I don't profess any knowledge of the larger situation – our bulletin is brief, though on the other hand it lacks the din of propaganda – but on the face of things, we are in a bad way.

I cannot attempt to examine the war situation here. But Germany's present systematic effort to destroy our seaports seems more successful than our long-term blockade of the continent of Europe. There must surely be a limit to the resistance against such mass air attack, if not on the part of the people, then of the material installations. Possibly there may be a way out but it's hard to see. John wants speedy capitulation, but I rather dread the results of that. John is the leading apostle of what is called defeatism, with a fierce burning bitter antagonism to the British war effort, a man who calls my country always wrong. But John is of Irish extraction. And though I go part of the way with him, I cannot go all of it.

But I am very tired of this life of plain living and no thinking, of crudity, discomfort, loud-mouthed bawdiness, so lacking in all that makes life worth living.

Friday 9 May

The ship has almost emptied itself of troops, but we linger on from breathless day to day. True to form, we seem the rejected unknown unwanted legion. Disembarkation authorities disclaim all knowledge of us. It would appear that we should never have been on board at

all. But we can't remain on board and there seems to have been much deliberation on what to do with us. According to rumour, we are going to Heliopolis, to Malta, to Mombasa. We are remaining on board to guard Italian prisoners en route to England, South Africa, Australia. We are sailing to Capetown there to await another convoy for India. We are changing ships for Basra. Most hopeful yearning of all: we are returning full speed to Liverpool. Amongst some of my own friends, this has become almost a conviction symptomatic of that tremendously strong pull towards home. Myself have a keen regard for home but these lads seem abnormally intent on its virtues, preternaturally nostalgic. Given the choice I should probably join them, but having come so very far I should like to see something – not 'some fun' as our playing at soldiers officer type describes it, but something of this land and people.

I know, however, that what will fill most of the time – discounting for the moment any action – will be the same old boring Army round which disgusts me more and more and makes me long for a speedy end of the whole business.

Strange vistas along the promenade deck so lately littered with bodies among which you picked an awkward path. Unusual freedom of movement, embarrassment of choice in selecting a site for one's lowly bed at night, no queues at the canteen. Yesterday, through the forests of masts and funnels and derricks and beneath the eternal pall of ships' smoke, the town was seen very clearly running along the low flat coastline. Square, flat-roofed white buildings, an occasional chimney stack...

Sunday 18 May

Almaza

So much to record but so little recorded: an extravagance of impressions but so slight a desire and small opportunity to assimilate them.

Monday 19 May

I foresee that this journal will peter out pretty soon: and I am fairly sorry about that.

Thursday 21 May

The mixture as before – with the added hardships of heat and sand and flies. The same old round of parades, fatigues, aimless time-passing: the same inefficiency and pathetic incompetence...

Friday 23 May

Afternoons, with the sun high and heat radiating from the dazzling sands, are wearying, especially when spent digging tent-emplacements. The wind blowing from the north comes warm and in no way refreshing over the hot desert.

I shall not readily forget our train journey across the sandy wasteland to the Nile valley. Hot, breathless, mouth-parching in the comfortless wooden-benched coaches: bad with

louvered shutters closed, but with them open and the hot khamsin licking in like a blast from a furnace, searing the eyeballs, drying the lips, burning the nostrils, hard to bear. This was definitely the worst journey I have ever made. The train was crowded with nondescript natives hawking every kind of worthless article with shrill importunate cries. At every halt along the line, swarms of pathetic begging urchins whining for baksheesh extending grubby palms, spreading lifted galab to catch coppers, cigarettes, any flotsam or jetsam thrown from the windows, scrambling beneath the wheels and struggling with one another for any stray largesse. Professional beggars these are, bred from infancy in the art of wheedling.

And at the sub-station where we disembarked, what a bedlam in the pitiless sunshine! Lemonade, ice-cream, pastry hawked at whatever price you cared to pay and much more if you weren't careful. What a people for wordy argument, seemingly baseless bickering and quarrelling, loud, ear-splitting, nerve-wracking, so that your head aches to hear them: wherever you go, you encounter this inevitable disputatious, high-pitched, rapid verbal battle: in cafes and bars between two waiters; in the street between pedlars and news-vendors; in camp, among the wallahs and scavengers: everywhere.

Two or three miles' march to camp in the comparative cool of evening after a day of travel and waiting, heat and hunger, discomfort and confusion. I have never known thirst so keen. Mouth parched from smoking endless cheap cigarettes and filled with a swollen and shapeless tongue, lips cracked, swallowing well-nigh impossible, saliva non-existent – most disturbing condition.

How welcome the dish of tea at the end – like some drink of the gods.

Sunday 25 May

Action, always difficult, becomes in this place almost impossible. Duties are performed of necessity, but much time is spent lying on one's back. Today I succeeded in reading a few chapters of *South Wind*. I have not yet managed to write any letters, salving my conscience with a cablegram. Letter-writing with such small expectation of reply is a thankless task. Life is depressing, fruitless, utterly void of purpose.

Tuesday 27 May

We have been warned for draft to the 8th Field Rgt, leaving supposedly tonight. We may not leave tonight, but we shall leave soon. The war draws nearer.

Part 3: May-June 1941

Saturday 31 May 1941

Egypt

My luck seems to be holding. I have been given, all unasked and bounteously, a job in HQ. I am alone now. The original squad has gradually dissipated itself. I ought to be extremely

pleased. Men strive by obscure and tortuous means to land billets in HQ and I have one gratuitously presented. I am glad. But that absurd strain of romantic curiosity or curious romanticism which constantly struggles with my more cynical bent prevents unalloyed glee. I have a ridiculous desire to be merely a 'greasy gunner'.

Tuesday 3 June

I am being put in charge of the anti-tank rifle, which according to regulations is posted on the outskirts of the camp as defence against tanks. The job consists in keeping the weapon clean and manning the post from dawn to dusk, an easy proposition since it will keep me out of the way of fatigues and parades. I have never fired an anti-tank rifle and I hope I don't have to, for the recoil will probably land me in Alex.

It becomes very hot now and from 12 to 5 is siesta time. We are lucky here, away from the front with the sea at our elbow and nothing to worry us.

The majority of the people are regulars and the regular is not a prepossessing person – a very ignorant, shut-in, self-satisfied type with whom I can have little or no satisfactory contact. The terrible stupidity of this life was hard enough to bear when one could laugh at it with kindred spirits. Now it becomes increasingly obnoxious: for long, sun-blazing hours, nothing to do but contemplate its ennui and apparent infinity. Nostalgia, hitherto kept well at bay, grows on me. And the development of the war brings home no nearer. At times, I feel that I had no life prior to my 28th birthday. The past eight months fill the picture to the exclusion of all else.

Wednesday 4 June

It is cold through the night. One dresses for bed instead of undressing.

This rifle duty of mine is the laziest occupation to date. After 8.30am parade I clean the weapon and mount it above the slit trench. Thereafter I am at leisure with nothing to do whatever through all the long hours of sunshine.

I have been writing home – in an unsatisfactory, disjointed hesitant style – and in my writing-case I came on several old letters written to me at Gosford, Dalry, Woolwich. They seem like ancient documents of some dim, half-forgotten age, having but little to do with me.

Thursday 5 June

Had I the inspiration I could write a novel, had I the books and inclination I could learn a language, study gunnery or theology, prepare a thesis on the vanity and futility of existence. But instead of these things I lie quiescent, gazing where the pale blue sky meets the dark blue sea and the dark blue sea meets the tawny grey green tufted desert; or observe the insect life so busy about me; or think of home; or doze restlessly; or read a page or two of Chekhov; or attempt to study some excerpt from my gunnery lectures. Nothing creative, nothing productive, nothing fruitful, nothing in the slightest degree useful or significant.

We are comfortable enough here. Last night a truck-load of beer came up – two bottles

per man. We have fresh meat every day – three meals a day. Yesterday for dinner we had steak and chips and onions, with rice pudding and the inevitable dish of tea. By any civilised criteria, the steak was not only unpalatable but almost inedible: the rice was singed: the tea was tasteless. Such criteria, however, have no sanction here and the meal was positively enjoyable and enjoyed. Sometimes I experience a shock when I realise afresh how my one-time fastidiousness has given way to easy acceptance of the 'mucking-in' methods of the Army.

Monday 9 June

I do not sleep well at nights, awaking almost invariably in the small hours in the wan, cold light of moon and stars. Last night I went late (10 o'clock) to bed, spreading my blankets on a hollow sandy place between two stunted fig trees. The sea's unceasing sound on the beach alone broke the silence, except for the tiny movement of some insect in the grass. I fell fairly soon asleep, thinking as usual of those at home, who are more than ever in my thoughts now that I spend so much time in solitude. But again I awoke about three in the morning, cold and uncomfortable. Aircraft droning overhead.

Tuesday 10 June

This morning, with a little trepidation and much expectancy, I fired my rather beautiful but faintly sinister long-barrelled rifle – five rounds with gratifying and to me astonishing effect. I carried it down to the shore where targets had been improvised at about 75 yds range – a five gallon oil drum and a four-gallon petrol tin. The other anti-tank rifle was fired first and I noted carefully the fellow's posture and the effect on him of the recoil. Despite my close attention, or perhaps because of it, the first shot took me by surprise – a loud, sharp, ringing explosion. His shoulders jerked back, but the rifle remained firm on the ground. When I spreadeagled on the mat, I felt not at all tense or excited as I expected to feel. My breathing was easy and I took my time in adjusting everything to my liking. My first shot was not a success because the trigger was stiff from lack of use, with the result that my over-exertion put out my aim. My ear rang – it's still ringing – with the noise so loud and so near. Having now got the measure of the weapon and rid myself of any diffidence in handling it, I settled down more purposefully to marksmanship and acquitted myself reasonably well. My second got the barrel fairly and two of the last three found their mark in the tin.

Last night, the thought occurred to me that, however unpleasant and in most respects regrettable this mode of life might be, it was not (as John was wont to complain bitterly) a mere waste of life and time, destitute of meaning. I have never regarded it simply as such. In fact, I welcomed foreign service and inwardly did not share my companions' reiterated moaning for home, their nostalgic remembrance and fruitless lamentation of their exile. Were I given tomorrow the chance of going home, I should most certainly seize it; for I grow weary of this masculine skeleton of existence, this material flesh and blood being, and

I long for the kindly familiarity of domestic, civilised life. But it came to me with the clarity of the moonlight that, in contrasting this with that mode of living and damning this as void and fruitless, I was forgetting my frequent petulant regrets at the littleness of my then way of life, at the monstrous daily timetabled existence, the days of small things, the repeated petty frustrations and disappointments, the general state of dissatisfaction with myself which self-examination inevitably revealed: and I perceived that, as proverbially, distance lent enchantment and presented what was out of reach in rosy hue, obscuring its true colours – hidden grey and jaundiced yellow. So that I became again convinced that enduring day-to-day happiness and mental and spiritual well-being is not attainable.

I could not call myself happy, yet in spite of everything I was very far from a state of positive unhappiness – very far. I confessed to myself that, though I longed for the comfort and affection of home life, though I grieved for the anxiety and heartsickness of those who waited for me, though I often felt bored and despondent here in the field, yet in this earthy, irresponsible, sun and moon existence, with its absence of conventional modes of behaviour, its closeness to the natural dialectic of life, the phases of the moon, the movement of the waters, the business of minute creation, the waking and the sleeping, in its natural original habit of being, a man might find happiness and heart's ease and peace of mind. But I am not the man.

Now where has this farrago of conscious composition and self-conscious philosophising brought me?

Wednesday 11 June

To sit naked in a shallow white-sanded pool of the Mediterranean washing clothes – is this not happiness? The sun is warm upon me. The gentle rippling lines of the cool water are reflected on the silvery bottom. The green submarine grasses, waving rhythmically, caress my skin with their tenuous soft tendrils. The minnows nose against my thighs, tickling. The bathers round about frolic noisily, like schoolboys on holiday. And Lofty, that long colonial, that natural man, that most attractive untutored personality, walks about, unconsciously happy in his lean sunburnt nudity, seeking a place to fish with his pin-hooked, meat-baited, makeshift line, singing to himself throatily, cursing volubly and fluently at the shifty cunning little bastards that find fat but shun capture.

Thursday 12 June

I seek with De La Mare to look my last on all things lovely every day, not that I have any premonition of death.

Movement in the air. Obviously preparations for action are proceeding.

Friday 13 June

The desert continually resounds with explosive sound – small arms and gun fire, bombs, the terrific concussion of Italian arms sending high into the sky a dense pillar of smoke that

blossoms out into cloudy forms hanging long in the air. And this morning from the sea comes a succession of loud reports, like the repeated slamming of a heavy door, while white smoke appears in the horizon.

I have perforce grown used to sharing my blankets with the ants and cockroaches: but for the past two nights I have had a new companion – a small field mouse. Last night, no sooner had I settled myself comfortably into my tight envelope bed, than I found it crawling enquiringly about my chest...

Saturday 14 June

The oft-rumoured push would appear to be on, and I am more than ever conscious of being carried on passively and remorselessly by a great machine. Yesterday afternoon, after the usual hubbub and delays, we left our pleasant position by the sea and moved southward into the desert. We were not alone. All over the plain to the horizons raced military transport, dashing on as fast as the nature of the terrain permitted, jolting over rocks and ridges, turning aside for nothing.

A most uncomfortable journey on the back of a light truck, tossed up and down, shivering in great coat and gloves.

This is a most amazing place. It is reputed to be the largest camp in Africa, and I could well believe it. But what a Godless, barren, hideous, sun-smitten wilderness. The Italians characteristically would seem to have sought hard to render it endurable. The place is littered with Cognac casks and basketed wine bottles.

A big battle is approaching. The strategy of it is rumoured but uncertain. We are definitely putting every effort into it. I wonder how many will come out of it.

This is Saturday. I hope there is a good game on at Whitehaugh.

Sunday 15 June

The battle continues. As I write, the air resounds with gunfire. I don't know the state of the battle, though it is rumoured to be going well for us. Nothing has so far come near us and the enemy is said to be very weak in artillery.

Monday 16 June

Last entry was rudely interrupted. The enemy shelled us to hell. Shells whined overhead, landing all over the position with a loud explosion. They were not big but uncomfortably close and plentiful. We moved back a little, but he followed us, bringing more guns to bear. The plain was dotted with vehicles tearing away out of range. We halted – why? – and remained stationary under his fire for close on an hour. Planes appeared, dive-bombing, and everyone sought even more shelter beneath and behind wagons – everyone, that is, except the Bren gunner Casey and me.

Casey was ordered to mount his gun in the open and get busy. The planes were very near and approaching. He began messing about with the stand. Before he could fix it, the planes

were overhead – four – one apparently British, the others German. By this time, he was cursing and seeking assistance. But nobody made any attempt to leave shelter and brave the open under the planes. These regular soldiers with several proud years of Indian service, and many harrowing tales of the last push, were not having any. They stayed put. And it was left to me – a scared civilian who'd never seen a shell burst before except in the pictures, who knew dive bombs only from the lurid descriptions of others – to emerge uncertainly from behind a wheel and try to help the unfortunate Casey, who was by now jumping with rage and fright.

I stood out there feeling most conspicuous and afraid, fumbling amateurishly with the mounting which I had never erected before and knew nothing about. The planes came straight for us, passing about 60 feet above. Casey blazed away from the hip, hitting one plane which turned away. All of them made off without opening fire. People emerged full of praise for Casey – jocular praise and sincere praise, but nothing to say in reply to his expression of opinion of their behaviour and nothing to say about mine – to notice which would emphasise their own. I was as scared as I've ever been. Had I been expert with Bren guns and known what to do, it wouldn't have been so bad, but my poor fumbling efforts out there in the open beneath these circling planes, expecting them to loose off at any moment, while the soldiers looked on from comparative safety – shook me.

But worse was to come. Ordeal by battle was certainly mine yesterday. We were ordered to move – at the time I thought we were retreating – and the whole force raced off over the desert. But we were going in a northerly direction towards the sea, advancing not retreating. And no sooner had we run out of the original fire than we entered much heavier fire from almost directly ahead. We turned right into it so that we could see, straight in front, the gun flashes. Shells went screaming over, bursting in front, behind, on either side, with much din and smoke and sand. No shelter was possible.

We were perched high aloft on our overload 15cwt truck, tearing along full out over stones and ridges, so that we bounced up and down in the air and all the boxes and baggage with us. Shrapnel whistled around me, a fragment striking the man beside me on the leg. And now the air was filled with the whine of bullets: we were under fire from a low crest on the right along which stood a line of soldiers with machine guns. No reply from us was possible. We were moving much too fast for any weapon to be brought to bear on them. We just kept on running the gauntlet until we outranged the machine guns. And so we breathed a little more easily and reviewed the experience. The astonishing fact was that there were few if any casualties. Jerry had the range all right, but we were well-spaced and fast moving, and tho' there were many near misses – one landed only about 12 yds in front of us – no vehicle was hit.

We began to settle down and things were fairly quiet for a little. Then five dive-bombers came out of the sun and swooped down on us. This was the most terrifying experience of the day – a concatenation of different astounding sounds that well nigh batters one senseless. The drone of the engines, rising to a deafening crescendo and a shattering explosion as they

dive, fading fast as they climb, the whistle of the bombs, the rattle of machine guns, the showering of stones and shrapnel – a petrifying, shocking experience. We had no slit trenches dug. I lay beneath the truck full-length, thinking my end had come. It did not seem possible that I could come out of this hellish maelstrom of furious sound and flying death. Thoughts of home came to me, I swear it, flashing, poignant thoughts. My fingers dug into the sand. The ground shook. Bits of shrapnel fell harmlessly about me. And then it was over. The Bofors engaged them and ground Brens clattered away as the planes weaved away westwards. Puffs of white smoke dotted the blue sky. A cheer rang out – they were gone.

Three six-inch guns were disabled, two men killed, several wounded. The damage, though bad enough, was as nothing compared with the sound and fury from which it seemed nothing could escape destruction. A feeling of relief almost unbearably sweet stole over me when I found myself alive and unhurt.

Tuesday 17 June

I who pay little heed to aircraft – not because I am bold but because I can never distinguish friend from foe – heard the cry 'Look out!' I leapt from my seat on the truck and paused a moment in uncertainty. Some lads were running hard over the desert away from the lorries, for Jerry dives on the lorries generally and a certain school of thought maintains you are safer in the open even without power. I knelt down by the outside rear wheel and squinted aloft to see what was going on. The rest was chaos.

I perceived several planes moving about the sky, one approaching us at speed. I crouched low as he unloaded not very far off but not near enough to hurt. Glancing up again I saw another flattening out for the dive. I scrambled round the wheel and crouched down close to earth beneath the tail. My position was precarious, for the driver was already there and had naturally taken up the best position between the wheels. This second pilot was very near and I could hear the scream of bullets and their impact on the sand about the truck. The explosion was terrific: the ground quaked, the truck seemed to rise in the air, and I was quite convinced it would collapse upon us. It didn't. The bedlam continued – rising and falling as each let fall his cargo.

It finished: the planes climbed. In the expectation of renewed attack, I ran some distance and sought concealment by a pathetically inadequate shrub. The driver came too and I could see him face down, digging out the sand with his fingers like a dog, clawing desperately to gain some little shelter, some shield to ward off this fiendish, roaring killer. I lay face down, nosing the sand, my fingers curving into its yielding substance, my heart thudding against my ribs, my mind bludgeoned into blankness and a kind of despair. They didn't come back, and I moved across to the scene of activity in the middle of the group where the wounded were being assembled. Clouds of smoke and sand from the craters darkened the air. There were many wounded and several dying or dead. Transport was a problem and some poor fellows must have had a tormenting journey on the rolling, bumping trucks which were perforce utilised as ambulances.

The MO worked like mad to cope with the steady stream of injured brought in on friends' arms. Many of us gave what assistance we could. I am glad I was not one of those who lingered like Peter in the desert, afraid to venture in lest the evil should come again. I try to work this out. I am not a physically brave man. I would fain have remained in the open far from this easy target. But self respect, or amour-propre, or some such feeling compelled me to go over and help.

What sights these were. I do not describe them. But one I found especially – interesting? revealing? I came upon a man quite uninjured visibly and upright on his legs, but wandering blankly and stupefied from place to place, his mind drowned in a sea of terror. This man I had met at Almaza – a most aggressive, blustering, confident military type – now overwhelmed. A 25-pounder loosed off – for the guns were still in action – as he dropped, grovelling on the ground like a whipped slave. One of our fellows was clean out of his mind and difficult to restrain. Some lay on stretchers unconscious or moaning, their wounds exposed pitifully. I cannot ever forget this scene – my initiation into violent martial death – all blood and sand and smoke.

Wednesday 18 June

Now that it is over and we are enjoying some slight respite, it all seems unreal and melodramatic – like a thriller. Yesterday, we were in hell. Many of us did not come out and many of those who did were shattered in mind and body. This then is modern warfare of which one reads so much, the stark savagery, the inhuman scientific cruelty, the power of any individual to endure which must be limited – if not by death, by complete breakdown and nervous prostration.

Friday 20 June

As before, the feeling that death is near and inescapable, the striving to make oneself as minute and invisible as possible, the dreadful expectation of sudden annihilation or injury, as one hears the swoop, the vicious spurt of bullets on the sand, the whistle of the falling bombs, the deafening explosion, the spattering of fragments, the realisation that one is still alive... experiences such as I have previously had only vicariously and don't wish to have again.

[On Tuesday] I saw and aided men dead, hideously wounded and disfigured; I saw raving madness and dumb, dazed, terror-stricken men wandering aimlessly about. I helped to bury the padre's broken body, the padre who that afternoon had drunk tea from my greasy mess tin. I helped dig his shallow grave in a bomb-crater, I made his cross with two bits of a packing case, I inscribed his name and titles thereon (since when this pen writes even worse than before), I consigned his body to the earth with few, piteously few, and faltering words. I witnessed agony, anguish, distress, courage, and the yellow streak of cowardice. Impressions made that day, though unconsciously thrust behind me, must remain with me always.

Saturday 21 June

One of the most vexing and discouraging features of the ranker's life is his ignorance of what goes on. Even yet, I am no nearer certainty of the scope or purpose or fate of the operations we were engaged in at the week's beginning. I learn today that the press emphasises that the recent operation was no big push at all, but merely a local operation designed to test the German strength and disposition.

I wish something would happen to bring this war to a speedy close. One can't escape the thought that luck such as some of us had this past week is bound to change. Apprehension is rife. Many lads maintain that they will not go up the line again. But they will. Astonishing how unconcerned they seem about the death of comrades – probably such a feeling is lost in their own shock and relief at escape. No wonder they call us up here 'desert rats'. I saw my face one day – hirsute and squalid, hair matted and unkempt, skin burnt and peeling and scrofulous, lips parched and cracked, a thick layer of sand and sweat all over the exposed parts. During the whole week's operations, I neither washed nor undressed and only once had off my boots. What joy to feel the sea wind on the face again!

Part 4: October 1944-February 1945

More than three years have elapsed between the last sequence of diaries and these, the last entries:

Thursday 26 October 1944

India

It occurs to me, considering this last leave, that I have been fortunate in my friendship with Dave. Rather odd, because he is not at all the same type of person as I am, and we have really few common interests or recollections. D's whole life is governed by his religion, doubtless to his spiritual and moral advantage, but to the exclusion of much else. He has derived little if any intellectual or cultural pabulum from his university which has given him merely a degree and a means of livelihood. He appears to have read nothing but prescribed texts and the Bible; his acquaintance with literature is that of a secondary schoolboy (on the science side), with the arts and social sciences just non-existent. He is uninformed on national and international politics to an irresponsible degree, and ignorant of quite elementary facts of general knowledge. His staple reading matter, apart from the Bible, consists of religious tracts and journals purveying the crudest hot-Gospelism and infantile moralising which I fancy would revolt even a genuinely religious man of any taste or cultivation. This seems a harsh indictment of one's best friend: but it's true and he himself would endorse it.

Where then the basis for friendship? He is a true Galahad; he doesn't smoke, drink, nor swear and his attitude to women remains what mine wants to be in the face of compelling fact. But despite all this divergence in intellectual, spiritual and material ways of life we

sustain easily a close communion of friendship: because we have the same sane and tolerant acceptance of the inevitability of difference and what I have found lacking in so many – a sense of perspective that diminishes so much that appears superficially so momentous, that refuses to be harassed by trifles and recognises a handful of silver for a handful of silver. All this sounds rather exalted and complacent. It isn't really.

Interesting to note that being so closely together for so long and having such essentially similar attitudes towards Army life, we react with disconcerting similarity to a given situation or action or personality so that often one says what the other is thinking.

D is very broad-minded and quite devoid of the nasty bigotry associated with the devotees of this brand of Christianity. In fact, I think he is sometimes more broad-minded than he feels he should be, and certainly more than he was reared to be. Contact with life in the forces has that effect: and, in addition, he is much too intelligent for prejudice. What astonishes me is how one so mentally acute can allow his religious faith to devour so completely his life. I don't dispute the value to personality of such faith as he has. But it's a high price to pay, even unwittingly, for soul's ease and a consciousness of the inner light. He has excluded himself from so many approaches to life. Sometimes, I fancy, he is conscious of this self-ostracism; but he will never now seek emergence. He is happy in his way.

Friday 27 October

Apart from the fundamental rational grounds for shying at such religious beliefs as D's (grounds by the way which I have never fully explored), I am repelled by such assurance of salvation, such bonhomie with God, such aggressively Christian living, which reduces the deity to a table companion, a drawing-room guest, a business partner. How those believers square their Christian principles, basic and unsullied as they claim to be, with participation in the war or in competitive business I don't understand – and I doubt if they clearly understand either. My impression is that they kneel, cloistered in an intimate corner of Christian living, virtuous in their proximate conduct, but blind or inattentive to the general perspective in which that conduct has place.

We stayed for two days in Calcutta with a charming married couple whom D had contacted through the Brethern during a former sojourn there. The husband, an Armenian, was a self-made successful business man and they lived in 'well-to-do', if not opulent style, which enabled them to extend very open-handed hospitality to serving men encountered at meetings of the Brethern. I was, in fact, an interloper but none the less welcome for that. Theirs was a Christian home: no drink, smokes, dancing, cinemas, race-going. But despite texts on the wall and book-cases filled with religious works and Bible commentaries to the total exclusion of secular literature of any kind, there was no long-faced sermonising talk, no sanctimonious gloom, but a bright and cheerful atmosphere with much innocent badinage. Evenings of Monopoly (a peculiar parlour game for practising Christians!) ended with Scripture reading and prayer, the company kneeling outwards from the centre, in faintly absurd but unembarrassed posture.

Saturday 28 October

But I am compelled to wonder when A talks of his business affairs. The war, with increasing government controls, is making things difficult. He just managed to avoid a deficit last year – only by God's goodness did he contrive to balance the ledger. This year, he is faced by a certain loss if business continues to fall off – but, with conviction, God will find some way. This revolts me. A long time ago, I recorded that my inclination to prayer faltered when I detected myself bargaining with God. This kind of talk is bargaining on the grand scale. I cannot believe in the Almighty as a merchant-trader. Such talk, such faith, seems to me the merest irrelevant impertinence, evidence of total ignorance of the meaning of religion. It is paralleled by A's inevitable comment on the disastrous period after Dunkirk – 'Only God's unfailing goodness brought us through'. There's surely a fundamental inconsistency in all this... No doubt I could explain it away but not, I fear, to my satisfaction.

Sunday 24 December

No Christmas at sea this year as we had expected, with possibly Hogmanay at home as we had sometimes hoped for. D has gone, just scraped through as he deserved to. But another operation faces the rest of us, tho' some may succeed in getting off shortly. I am resigned to several months more out here, and curse myself for having built up hopes of early return. But despite condemnation of the official incompetence which has caused this grievous disappointment, I can't swoon in self-pity or fret myself with a sense of harsh treatment as so many are doing. There are blessings to count.

I live a more idle, rum-swilling life in more amiable natural surroundings than ever before in my foreign service – which has not generally been conspicuously pleasant. This is a comparatively excellent station, combining ideal climate with a certain amount of social amenity. Location is delightful and wonderfully like home – in the hills almost 1,000 feet above sea level.

Tuesday 26 December

The people of these hills – Khasis – are rather peculiar and quite different from the men of the plains. They are short and squat in stature, broad of face. They have the sturdiness and outward boldness of appearance common in hill people as distinguished from the slenderness and unobtrusive, almost furtive bearing of the plainsfolk of India. They are fair-skinned – like Chinese or Tibetans. Christianity seems common among them, introduced apparently by Welsh missions. A child in a neighbouring village died recently and after the burial, the mourners returned and spent the night to a late hour, singing Christian hymns. They have also the Christian vice of bibulousness. Every night the road carries unsteadily a band of singing roisterers from their carousels on the local brand of 'wine' – reputedly a distillation from fir cones or resin!

Many of their women wax sleek and elegant, plying the oldest profession among the

troops in town. In general, the village women are ill-favoured – like all such over-burdened with work and child-bearing, shapeless, wrinkled and dried of skin, unkempt and matted of hair, trudging along stooped beneath their conical wicker baskets slung by a straw band encircling their brows, or squatting by their piles of oranges and bananas on the roadside. But the younger girls are frequently handsome enough in their oriental way: well-rounded, with slant eyes and large white teeth smiling in their broad smooth tawny faces, their shining black hair surmounted by the inevitable hood that joins their shapeless ankle-length cloak.

They don't wear saris or pyjama trousers like Indian women, but numerous petticoats, shawls and bodices with invariably over all the aforementioned cloak of blue or grey. This dress is common to all classes: but the ladies of the profession emphasise their calling and italicise their charms in the time-honoured fashion, by a liberal and rather outré application of cosmetics. Rouge and powder on their cheeks give an unnatural, purple bloom like that of some exotic flower petal: and this elaborate complexion goes oddly with their native costume and road-worn tough bare feet. Sometimes, however, they wear high-heeled court shoes and western-style dresses, but always cling to their dark cape and hood. Many of them are extremely attractive, despite a heaviness of feature.

The frequent earth tremors here are disconcerting.

Wednesday 27 December

This brief period has been the most pleasant and un-Indian we have spent. We've had little or no work to do and more social opportunities than in any other station. I've actually been to several dances here! Life in the mess, despite the inevitable 'incidents', has been one unbroken round of drinks. Most of us have rather let go, so that almost every night has seen the school in session, and no credits accruing! Yes, all of us – including officers – and certainly making hay here.

Nursing sisters and ANS and WACs, very much augmented by a strange European regiment of grass widows peculiar to such hill stations, provide amenable enough dancing partners, and often something more. The club is an excellent stamping ground for the officers, but other ranks are by no means neglected, generally proving more acceptable if anything to the ladies, who attend their dances nobly – though never in numbers large enough. Women in this country are in the enviable position of being in constant demand: none, however hard-to-find her charms, fails to attract: there is no shelf, no wall, for faded flowers. And the inevitable consequence is that all the flowers, however unblooming, are soon plucked – lawfully or otherwise.

Friday 29 December

After four years, I should have ceased to complain about the officer type, but restraint is difficult. I have but slight experience outside this unit, but encounters with commissioned ranks, casual and momentary, fail to persuade me that our cross-section is not fairly

representative. The type – and type it is – inspires no confidence, evokes ridicule, antagonism, even contempt. Good officers there must be – there are, in fact, for I've met some – but blanketed under a frightening mass of good-timing incompetents, fatuous 'pukka sahibs', complacent, jumped-up Jacks in office, interfering adolescent dummkopfs.

It becomes my conviction that a unit would run much more efficiently were all commissioned ranks removed. As it is, the NCOs in effect keep things going despite the interference from above, largely by ignoring or bypassing orders or cleaning up the mess made by initially obeying them. Contemplating the officers I have encountered, I am bound to conclude that we are still led by asses, despite the pseudo-democratic principle of selection. It's hard to determine how they are selected, still harder to discover what they are taught. Here we have milky-mouthed, ruddy-cheeked boys from school, all wide-eyed and ignorant of men and affairs, but very conscious of their little brief authority and striving to wield it manfully, strutting and fretting aimlessly on a stage set with traps.

Sunday 28 January 1945

And are ye sure the news is true? Recent experience increases caution; but it seems fairly certain this time: and spring should see me home.

Monday 29 January

Now that this overseas tour has come within appreciable distance of conclusion, I am tempted to try to consider it in reasonable perspective. But the effort is too much, so that I'll have to content myself with a few random reflections.

Initially, let me say that four years is a long time out of a man's life, out of the life he has been in the process of building, that is: a long time to live apart from his family and friends and professional and recreative interests: a long interlude between discrete stages in his career as in his domestic and social life. Perceiving this to be true, I early resolved to try and prevent my service from becoming such a lacuna in living. Of course, I didn't succeed; not at least as I wished to. But I may have achieved a certain continuity, or expansion maybe, of experience, an extension of factual knowledge, which make those years other than wasted and lost forever. Much has been lost, but surely something gained?

I think sometimes of the studies I might have pursued, the reading I might have done in those years, instead of spending them on this persistently material, unintellectual level. But memory tells me those studies and literary exercises would almost certainly have faltered and failed: and experience assures me that there are other worthy pursuits than book learning. Contact I have made with life at various levels, with men of widely different histories, backgrounds, characters, dispositions, peoples of strange oriental tradition and way of life, regions and climates only dimly glimpsed at second hand before.

Russell Herd and others frequently conjecture about me in letters, wondering if I remain the man they knew, if my character, or outlook, has changed radically. Introspection I shy at. But I doubt if I have altered much – certainly not much improved. Natural indolence

and lack of initiative or resolve or energy have, I'm afraid, strengthened during these years of regimentation and instructions from above. Scepticism, cynicism, distrust of everything have grown more profound, even bitter, as I have watched and discussed the progress of the war, the antics of the government, and more immediately, the behaviour of superiors, their conduct of unit affairs, the men themselves above and around me. I have become more critical and wary (only impregnable easy-going innocence restrains the habit of mind) and I incline to suffer fools less gladly than formerly.

Probably I am coarser in speech and behaviour, even in thought, less alert mentally, less appreciative of refinement, elegance, beauty natural or artistic, but broader in sympathy and understanding of men and men's reactions, opinions, problems. If I have changed, I fancy the change is not obvious or even remarkable. Amen!

Tuesday 30 January

Sometimes I wonder how these years will have affected my attitude to my pre-war profession and mode of life. I am uncertain. Teaching never appealed much, but whether it will now appeal more or less only the future will show. The realms of gold, not much travelled recently, have a manifest attraction from where I sit now; and I intend many an excursion across them when opportunity again occurs. More than that I cannot foretell. I think that probably I shall never make any resolute effort to write creatively. Too many people try in any case. Probably some study in the art of living would be better.

Saturday 3 February

As I sit here at 9 o'clock in the chilly night air, at frequent intervals I hear from neighbouring tents high-pitched cackles of mad laughter, screams and catcalls. I take them for granted, but it occurs to me that a man fresh from Blighty would experience some perturbation or at least astonishment at such insane mirth – and, further, at the behaviour accompanying it, indeed at the general behaviour of many men in this unit. It is far from normal. I recollect in my Training Regiment that several senior NCOs were considered by us recruits as slightly mental: and they invariably proved to have seen long service in India. This makes me wonder...

Monday 5 February

From our tents on the slope we look across a level basin of geometrically squared paddy-fields fenced all round by low hills that rise suddenly up from the flat. And often in the early morning, before the sun tops the higher ridge, all this arena is deep-flooded with mist that laps up the hillsides, submerging the lower row of tents and just leaving the treetops to float ghostly and trunkless on its surface.

In the evening, when the sun strikes flatly, the eastern mountains glow richly like red sandstone, but immediately it sets they drop this vivid mantle, appearing in neutral tones, dim grey and black in the ravines. By daylight, one sees their contours clearly and the green

of vegetation scarred by the red brown soil of footpaths climbing up and round their shoulders. I look at those hills a lot and beyond them to the distant higher ridges that hem Burma. And I often watch the Dakotas and fighters planing over them and think how fortunate I am and how secure.

So ends the war journal of J P McCondach, inscribed on the first page with his address, 21 Whitehaugh Drive, Paisley, Scotland 'to which please return, if I don't'. But he did return, to resume his career in teaching and to leave, on his death in 1996, aged 84, one published novel and several sonnets

War in the north

Andrew Hook

2004

Wick is a small town of a few thousand people in the far north-east of Scotland. The odd thing is that, consciously or unconsciously, nearly everyone in the UK knows of it. Day after day, night after night, there it is on our television screens. When the forecasters are talking about the weather in Scotland, including the north of Scotland, Wick is almost invariably there, a great deal larger than life, as though it were a Newcastle, a Glasgow, a Cardiff, rather than the tiny place it actually is.

It's where I was born – an early Christmas present in 1932. But in terms of the Wick of that time, my parents were a rather odd couple. Despite living and working at the very top of Scotland, beyond the Highlands, my father was an Englishman from Gloucestershire. In the 19th century his family had been local church-builders, but his own father had moved with the times and in the early years of the 20th century had left churches for the new world of motor cars, garages, petrol pumps and repairs. This grandfather, who died comparatively young in the 1930s, was never a presence in my life, but his widow – my 'Nan-in-Stroud' – was another matter, as we shall see.

First though, how had my father, an Englishman from Gloucestershire, ended up in Wick? He was among those 17-year-olds who passed themselves off as 18 in order to join up in the First World War. Originally, he served in the Royal Artillery – once in a blue moon he would make a joking remark about Vimy Ridge (how I regret never having pressed him to tell me the whole story of his war experiences). What I do know is that at some stage he was gassed – something that probably contributed to the chronic bronchitis he died of at a relatively early age – and subsequently sent back to France. At this stage, he apparently transferred out of the Artillery and moved to the Royal Flying Corps where he trained as a wireless operator: Morse code and wireless telegraphy rather than romantic dog-fights over the Western Front. But this final part of his war experience was to become the source of Corporal Hook's job for life.

When the war ended my father, unlike his brothers, chose not to return to the family business in Gloucestershire. Instead, capitalising on his wireless telegraphy skills gained during the war, he took a job with the GPO's coastal radio service. After early postings in Wales and the west of England, he found himself dispatched to Wick Radio in the most distant and remote part of the UK.

Did he know anything at all about Scotland? Not to mention its furthest north-east corner? I have no idea, but if the notions and attitudes of the other members of his family are anything at all to go by, then the answer has to have been no. For all of them, Scotland was and remained another country. So I expect it was for my father in the 1920s. But he was

a sociable and adaptable man. Within a short time, he had acted out a familiar pattern by meeting and marrying a local girl, whose name happened to be the same as the northernmost headland of the British mainland.

So we were a Wick family. Growing up, I had no sense at all that the Gloucestershire connection made any difference. I was who I was and that was it. True enough, there were summers when we made the long odyssey from Caithness to Gloucestershire in our Hillman Minx. (My father shared enough of his family background always to be a car person, expert at maintenance and repairs.) I remember little of these trips except the initial worry of having to negotiate the steep climbs at Dunbeath and particularly Berriedale with its frightening hairpin bend. Would we make it unscathed? We always seemed to, but it was a relief to be over the Ord, that test left behind.

After that, I remember very little until the journey was broken at Warrington in the south of Lancashire where we could stay with relatives. My uncle – on my mother's side – was a GP there, a brusque and jocular figure not entirely unlike Dr Cameron in *Dr Finlay's Casebook*. (And, as it happens, I'm sure I remember my uncle saying that he knew A J Cronin when he was studying medicine at the University of Edinburgh.) The doctor's large house, complete with consulting rooms and his own pharmacy, was something of an adventure in itself.

The Wick house I grew up in – Mount Hooley – was also large, but it was shared with my maternal grandfather and grandmother. (How, I wonder how, had my father been persuaded to agree to this arrangement?) Not that I recall any hint of a problem – and the house was large with an extensive front garden, with lawns and large flower-beds, as well as a big back garden for potatoes and vegetables, various outhouses and a garage which my father built himself.

Nonetheless, the Warrington way of life was subtly different. I sensed a living standard and a comfort level higher than I knew at home. Almost certainly what it was about was that GPs were substantially better off than radio operators. Still, Warrington had its drawbacks. In those days, tanning was one of its main industries and the result was a permanent, heavy smell that made Kirkcaldy's linoleum seem comparatively innocuous.

Gloucestershire – and specifically Ebley village, near Stroud – was nothing like this. It was a high, walled garden, an orchard heavy with the scent of apple and other fruit trees. It always seemed to be warm and still, and I had never known anything like it. The garage was there, the petrol pumps and cars, but later there was something new and again it was something I had never seen: television sets. On display one or two would be working: black and white cricket matches, England v the West Indies in the days of the three Ws – Weekes, Worrell and Walcott. But all of this was incidental.

The reality of the Gloucestershire experience was my Stroud grandmother, even though she had died well before the television days. Why was she so important? Because she was the difference. There after all was a difference, and she was it. My mother supplied the clue. Somehow in Stroud we children had to be careful, less free and easy. In Wick, even in

comfortable Warrington, it never even crossed our minds that we might offend anyone. But here it was different.

Looking back, I am sure that what was involved was the great divide. The wife from the distant north of Scotland, never able to be familiar with her in-laws, having to cope with the intimidating, elderly Englishwoman, the head of a large and expanding family. No wonder that she was nervous, a bit fearful, and that her fears were passed onto us. My nan at home was a familiar, reassuring figure; my 'nan-in-Stroud' an intimidating one. So there at least the divide was real; Wick and Gloucestershire could not always be so easily accommodated. But let me not exaggerate. It is only looking back that I understand my mother's attitude; and at the time I had no awareness of it having anything to do with Scotland and England. But that I'm sure now was at least a factor, exacerbating the normal tension between wife and mother-in-law.

That there really was a cultural gap – not one necessarily involving superiority or condescension or anything of the kind, simply an assumption of difference, of almost foreignness – the attitudes and opinions of my father's family made clear at a much later date. But I believe that for most of his life my father, for so many years the odd man out, the Englishman in Wick, was successful at overcoming it. Yet at the very end, when he was in hospital in Edinburgh for the last time, his mind wandering, he began to say things about the Scots and the English which riveted me with their suggestion of long-suppressed pain and persecution. Just for an instant or two an abyss of prejudice and ill-will seemed to open up in front of me. But if that is what it was, it was too late for any kind of exploration to be made.

There had been times when my father struck local people as something of an eccentric. One occasion in particular sticks in my mind. It happened early in the war. As well as the family house in Wick, we owned a small farmhouse in the country a few miles along the north coast from John o'Groats. The Huna house had been built by my great-grandfather Dunnet, and had never been modernised. There was no running water; no electricity; and only the most primitive form of sanitation in an outhouse. Yet the house itself was solid enough with a large kitchen containing an open hearth for burning peat, with a box-bed in the opposite wall, as well as another bedroom and a kind of pantry where the pails of water, carried two at a time in a square wooden frame from the well across the fields, were kept. There were unused farm buildings at the back, and a kind of rough kitchen garden, with flagstone walls, covered the area between the front door and the passing main road.

In the summer of 1940, my father decided he should dig an Anderson shelter in the front garden of the Huna house. (The Wick house was well-provided with a deep cellar.) An Anderson shelter in a farmland on the remote northern coast of Scotland? What mad eccentricity was this? This was certainly the view of most of the locals who sometimes would watch from the roadside as my father worked away with pick and shovel. But my father was no fool. He had been in the First World War – not that many years ago. He knew what high explosives could do. North across a couple of fields beyond the main road lay the sea. And a few miles across the Peatland Firth was Orkney.

Orkney's Scapa Flow was one of the British Navy's most important bases. But its defences had already been penetrated. In October 1939, a German U-boat had torpedoed and sunk the anchored battleship *Royal Oak* with the loss of hundreds of British lives. And there had also been German bombing raids on the naval base. At night in Huna, we could sometimes see the dark sky crisscrossed by the beams of Scapa's searchlights. My father's thinking must have been that during some such raid the lights on our side of the firth might accidentally or intentionally become the target. But the shelter was never finished. I remember it as a forlorn, half-finished warning. Perhaps after 1940 my father decided the danger from the air had passed.

This was certainly not true of Wick where, despite its remoteness, the war had come much earlier than for most of the UK. First there were reports of the loss of the *Rawalpindi*, and later of the *Jervis Bay*. These were both smallish passenger liners requisitioned by the Admiralty and converted into lightly-armed merchant cruisers in the early days of the war. Their job was to help protect British merchantmen convoys in the Atlantic from German submarine and surface vessel attack.

In November 1939, the ex P&O liner *Rawalpindi*, escorting a convoy, found herself confronting the two German battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* in the Atlantic between Iceland and the Faroe Islands. Hopelessly outclassed and outgunned, the *Rawalpindi* could only try to gain a little time while the convoy under escort scattered. When she went down, three of the four Caithness men on board were lost – the first of the 40 or so Wick and Caithness seamen who would die in the war. Almost exactly a year later the losses on board the *Jervis Bay* would be heavier. Escorting a convoy out of Halifax, Nova Scotia, in November 1940, the *Jervis Bay* in mid-Atlantic engaged the pocket battleship *Admiral Scheer* in another heroic but equally hopeless attempt to defend the merchant ships she was escorting. This time, of the 18 Wick and Caithness men among her crew, nine were killed. The news of such losses travelled fast.

Much more surprising were the civilian deaths that occurred equally early in the war. Wick would surely have struck most people as one of the last places in Britain to be a likely target of German bombing. But the truth was different. Mount Hooley House stood high on the north side of the town, from the back commanding an excellent view down to and across Wick harbour which had been developed and extended by the Stevenson family in the 19th century. (RLS himself spent some time in the town but the experience was clearly an unhappy one. 'Sub-arctic Wick' he described as 'one of the meanest of man's towns... on the baldest of God's bays'.)

In fact Wick, had become more and more of a boom town in the later decades of the 19th century and in the years before the First World War. My grandfather Dunnet often spoke of how he remembered being able to walk across the bay – not miraculously on the water but on the decks of the closely-packed herring boats, all there for the hugely rewarding fishing season. Of course by my time in the Second World War these great days were long gone – though there would still be drifters in the harbour and sometimes stacks of herring barrels on the quay.

In any event, early in the war – it was the first of July 1940 – I remember all too clearly standing at the foot of the large potato garden at the back of our house looking out across to the harbourside area where a huge plume of black smoke was rising in the air. The preceding bang had been loud and clear and we had run to see. A German plane had dropped two bombs – aiming at the harbour perhaps? Or was it simply lost, unable to find its target, and getting rid of its bombs before returning home? Whatever the case, the bombs fell in the late afternoon in the middle of a busy street. No fewer than 15 men, women and children were killed, and many more injured. Was this attack big news nationally? Or censored perhaps? I just don't know. But I do remember that thick black smoke spiralling up into the sky. It has been suggested that this was the first daylight bombing raid on Britain in the Second World War. Perhaps it was... but there were more raids to come.

One of my very earliest memories is of being taken to see inside the Old North School, very close to where I lived. This was the primary school I would have been expecting to attend a year or so later. It was an old, presumably Victorian structure, and I recall feeling it was a drab and dreary and uninviting place. This no doubt was why it was decided to build a brand new school – the New North School – which was completed just before the outbreak of the war. Built on the northern edge of the town, alongside Wick's small airfield, the gleaming New North should have been my school. It never was.

With the coming of the war, Wick's airfield suddenly became strategically very important as a centre of operations for Coastal Command. Large numbers of RAF personnel arrived in the town and there was a problem over accommodation. Our house was one of those that became a billet for RAF officers. But the new school building was too good to miss. In no time, it was taken over as the headquarters of the expanding air operations. (As a result, much of my primary education took place in church halls and other temporary locations.)

But the importance of the airfield ensured that Wick remained a target. Only a few months after the harbour bombing, in October 1940, German aircraft launched a night-time raid. One bomb fell on the bungalows of Hill Avenue, close by the airfield, killing three people including a school classmate of my brother's. German bombers returned the following summer and this time I happened to be outside in the late evening in a neighbour's garden and saw a German plane zoom past with the bright flashes of tracer bullets coming from or at it.

As the tide of war slowly turned, Wick ceased to be a target. The air-raid siren continued to go off with some frequency, and one never stopped being a bit fearful until the all-clear sounded. But there were as I remember no more bombs. Later on, though, there were nights when the sound of aircraft approaching and landing seemed to drone on all night. These were nights, I now understand, when British bombers, flying out of East Anglia and the south of England to attack Germany's cities, were diverted north on their return journeys to avoid possible German interception. Hence a time came when I became an avid listener of BBC Radio's reports of yet another bomber raid over Germany's cities...

Yet there were summers away from Wick when the war seemed a world apart. My father had been posted to the remotest north-west coast of Sutherland to operate a tiny, temporary radio station, located south of Cape Wrath and north of Kinlochbervie, designed to work with the endless Atlantic convoys crucial to conducting the war in Europe. I spent two idyllic summers in that unspoiled area of deep sea-lochs and beautiful, empty, sandy beaches – empty, that is, except for the flotsam and jetsam washed in from an Atlantic Ocean at war. Sutherland, of course, was only a temporary posting, and our family base remained in Wick. With the war over, however, it was not long before my father's job took him permanently south. Edinburgh became the family base, and my own time at school in Wick was drawing to its close.

As I have indicated, in none of these early years was I particularly conscious of who or what – in national identity terms – I was. Scottish? British? Anglo-Scottish? The question just did not arise. It was never an issue. Yet I have to admit that in my sixth-form, pre-university year at an Edinburgh college, I did stand (and win) as the Scottish National Party candidate in the school's mock election. The choice of party, I suspect, had more to do with expectations of victory than political ideology. Certainly as a student at Edinburgh University, despite the exploits of those who stole the Stone of Destiny in London, I took no part in nationalist politics. Cultural nationalism, on the other hand, did make some impact. MacDiarmid, Sydney Goodsir Smith – it was hard not to be broadly on their side. But kilts and the political movement – that was another matter.

Perhaps it was a vague sense of my mixed background that kept me firmly on the sidelines, but in fact I think I was still in denial that the issue of national identity had any kind of personal relevance. I was who I was – end of story. In fact, it was only post-university that it was brought home to me that indeed I did apparently possess a national identity – and then only because it was forced upon me. In the early, traumatic days of National Service I was taken aback, stunned, really, to hear myself called 'Jock'. For the very first time, I was made to realise that there were plenty of people out there who saw me – whatever I thought – as no more and no less than just another run-of-the-mill Scot. End of their story. Did I like that? Not a lot.

I felt better, I think, two years later, when sitting across the table from a battery of Oxbridge dons being interviewed for a postgraduate fellowship to study in America, I heard the Master of Balliol asking, was I really from Wick?

The start of it all

Robins Millar

2008/09

Part 1: Glasgow, August 1914

Saturday 1 August

The assassination of the Austrian heir and his wife by a youthful Serbian had caused but a mild sensation. A few big headlines in the morning newspaper, some desultory talk among the public, and the topic died. Boxing was the subject of most interest, the press having boomed some recent contests between heavyweights, notably Carpentier, a Frenchman, and 'Gunboat' Smith, an American. Preparations for a forthcoming bout between Carpentier and an Englishman, Ahearn, were widely discussed.

Home rule was also big in the public eye. Would Ulster with 10,000 armed volunteers revolt under Sir E Carson if the Bill became law? Would Redmond's National Volunteers respond to the challenge? Gun-running had caused a riot in Dublin in which soldiers had fired fatally on a mob. A surfeit of sensations at home in fact had shut the continental ferment out of the press.

Great was the surprise at the news of Austria's ultimatum to Serbia and her threat of invasion. The consequences of the action rushed immediately like a flame over Europe and, of course, over our newspapers. Russia backed Serbia. Germany threatened Russia and commenced instant mobilisation. France, perceiving danger, took similar precautionary measures. A European conflict of appalling dimensions became imminent and Britain began to see storms ahead for herself.

General talk favoured the hope of British neutrality being preserved. War seemed incredible, inconceivable. 'Why should we fight?' people said. Little else was talked of, but everyone was rejoicing that we were out of the danger zone.

Then Germany declared war on Russia. The credit system collapsed. The bank rate rose to 8%. Our interests in the position became apparent. People began to shake heads and see possibilities of the worst character.

I spoke to a boy, Andrew Todd, early in the week who was in the yeomanry. 'If war breaks out, the territorials will be mobilised,' he said. I did not believe him, until he assured me emphatically. 'Still,' he said, 'I don't suppose we shall be called up'.

Our family came back from Tarbert on Saturday (our father and mother were in Ireland) and they spoke of the shock the news of the increase of the bank rate had been to a CA on the steamer, who had been ignorant of the rush of events. Food prices were as usual when I went out late on Saturday night to buy provisions for the house. The newspaper bills saying 'War inevitable' were taken still as scare headlines.

Germany had invaded Belgium; Austria had attacked Serbia. Public opinion remained calm.

Sunday 2 August

The Sunday weekly newspapers came out as usual. *Reynolds* had big bills 'Britain must avoid war' but already the storm had burst. The unaccustomed sound of a newsboy shouting '*Special Times*' on a Sunday afternoon sent me sprinting to the street. The first of the war specials had come out. I read it feverishly and in a grave mood handed it to the family who were in the parlour entertaining Jessie Lothian and two of her cousins, girls who had sailed up to Dundee from London.

The paper's excitement about warships in the North Sea infected the girls. We all read the papers together over each other's shoulders. We foresaw that the girls would not be able to return by water to London and so it turned out. They had to cut short their holiday and take the train.

The paper told of the mobilisation of the naval reserve and their proposed departure at 9.40pm and we talked of going to see them off. Fortunately, we refrained. A mob gathered with similar intentions at the station, and the rough element becoming noisy at being kept outside the gates, had to be dispersed by police baton charge. A friend of mine, Fraser, returning from Dunoon was kept in by the crowd for an hour in a state of extreme impatience, having left his house keys in a dairy which was soon likely to close for the night.

The newsboys made huge hauls on this Sunday's editions. I spoke to one who had been sent down to Rothesay and had made 19 shillings. 'They were tumblin' over ye to get them there,' he said. 'The folks was mad for them.' But his friends remaining in town had made, some of them, between four and five pounds. Some of the newsboys were half-drunk and hoarse as crows for days after.

Monday 3 August

The morning papers made it clear that there was little hope of British neutrality, news that immediately caused panic in the country. An extraordinary rush on provisions began at once and prices were rocket-like. Sugar was 2d on Saturday, by Monday night it was 7d, next day it rose to 8d, then 9d. Grocers were sold out in a day. We joined the rush by purchasing stocks of sugar, flour meal etc, sufficient for a month or two, but at increased prices. Annie [Robins' sister] had difficulty in getting them.

I went down to our cousins and there we discussed maps and campaigns.

The excitement throughout the town was intense. People bought edition after edition of papers. Our boys saw Austrians at their consul's office, preparing to leave the country. Annie saw a Frenchman at the station, ignorant of English and feverishly anxious to get somewhere, no-one knew where; last seen scurrying frantically up the platform in the direction, no doubt, of France.

Sir E Grey made a statement in parliament that made it evident that the British fleet at least was to be engaged to protect France. Feeling was now strong against Germany's 'aggression', an opinion which the newspapers were vigorously exciting into jingoistic war fever.

Tuesday 4 August

War was not yet declared but the talk of the day was full of it. Maps had the interest of novelty and vivid explanation of the German campaign in Belgium filled our office. There was an aged history book, dating from before the Franco-Prussian war, with maps that still showed Alsace-Lorraine as belonging to France. This was requisitioned to settle burning arguments as to the contours of Europe until finger smudges and pencil marks strayed all over it.

Newspapers were being tremendously cut down. While none of the Glasgow papers came to the extremity of the *Paris Petit Journal*, which came out in a sheet of two pages, the *Daily Record* and the *News* and *Times* came out in four pages only. Even so, they were bought in thousands. Newsboys pervaded every street of the city from morning till night shouting monotonously.

Already the difficulties of acquiring our staple stock of provisions had made themselves a nuisance in the hospital [where Robins worked]. We were ordered to get in enough for two months but for a while it seemed we could get nothing. Eventually, business settled down again and provisions were sent up once more.

At night, mobilisation notices for reservists and territorials were posted throughout the town. I saw groups of people in Sauchiehall Street gazing quietly at the posters in the lamplight. There was no sign of excitement save for the unusually large crowds strolling in the streets and the motor cars with officers in uniform rushing at high speed hither and thither. Cousin Mary came home in the afternoon from Kilwinning. She had been unable to sleep the night before through thinking of the war, but there had been no excitement in the country except in the way of a rush on provisions, which had taken place everywhere. After midnight we were awakened by hoarse shouting from a newsboy passing along Alexandra Parade. 'Midnight Special – Britain declares war on Germany.' So we learned of the culmination of the expected trouble.

Wednesday 5 August

All day territorials to be seen proceeding to their centres of mobilisation in the town. A thousand men were called up from the tramway. There were not many from the police, but I saw some, half-intoxicated from the farewell cups they had quaffed, bidding goodbye to their cheering comrades. Many schools were requisitioned as barracks for the territorials and they were to be seen leaning on the walls conversing with admiring friends or sitting on the window sills shouting 'Haw Bella!' to passing girls. They were busy going round the town commandeering horses and it was amusing to see boys quite unaccustomed to the ways and fashions of that fierce animal tramping gingerly alongside huge Clydesdales at the full length of the bridle rope. I met four in a small teashop, Glasgow Highlanders. One said that whenever his horse reared up, 'I went four storeys'. Although only supposed to be liable for home defence, they had volunteered for active service and were hoping to be sent to Belgium.

Stobhill was being got ready for a territorial hospital, 1,000 beds being requisitioned. We were soon kept busy handling a rush of transfers. Groups of people were to be seen in the streets discussing the war news. One argument between an old white-bearded man of 70 and a boy of 22 I found amusing. There was great disgust against the German aggression and violation of Belgian neutrality; and a good deal of hysterical jingoism beginning.

In the picture houses, patriotic songs were loudly cheered and sung. One was kept bobbing up and down as *God Save the King* was repeated throughout the performance though it sometimes happened that the anthem went grotesquely with the film that showed on the screen. And at the bands, audiences joined in *Rule Britannia* and cheered vociferously, apparently under the impression that they also were thus helping to save the country's honour and fame from German desecration.

Children everywhere were seen playing at war. Boy Scouts and Boys Brigades were aching to get into service; and one heard of crowds enlisting and of youthful aspirants for bullets measuring themselves all over.

Thursday 6 August

Rumours of the wildest description swept through the city, of battles and disasters, of British and German fleets destroyed or triumphant. We had a note meanwhile from father in Ireland saying 'What a blessing it was not civil war', which caused us to smile.

Glasgow was an armed camp in appearance. Territorials in hundreds were in the streets, leading lines of horses, riding motorcycles, driving motor cars and waggons, strolling, flirting, marching, loafing. For a time, the telephone exchanges seemed almost monopolised by the military. A workman told us that for a week past the officials had been working feverishly putting up telephones along the countryside to all sorts of small cottages and farmhouses. In the stables next door uniforms were frequently seen as the horses were being taken over by the territorials.

We got in most of our extra stores into the hospital, Mr Balmer heaving a sigh of relief when the seven bags of sugar arrived after 6pm. The carter was drunk and in turning his horse allowed it to fall on the slippery asphalt slope; but this, like other discomforts throughout the town, such as a defective tram service, the closure of banks, the rise of prices, the shortage of change (postal orders being put into currency), interruption of train service, and so on, one took philosophically and with stoicism.

Stories came out of great Belgian victories at Liege in defence of the Meuse against German invasion and the public became confident, losing some of the nervousness, which had been so evident at the prospect of having to tackle such a vaunted opponent as Germany.

Friday 7 August

I had a talk with Tom Johnston of *Forward*. He emphasised the number of Social Democrats in the German ranks and insisted that they were so against the war that they

would certainly fight with little enthusiasm and make for safety at the earliest opportunity. (*Forward* had taken a strong anti-war attitude. Whether it could continue it remained to be seen.)

He felt sure that if Germany were dishonourably defeated, the foundations of royalty and aristocracy there would be severely shaken, and a republic might rise from its ruins. He was confident that, in any case, the socialist movement would receive an impetus from the reaction after the war. I hinted that the militarist party was even more likely to have its hand strengthened in the fear of a repetition of the catastrophe but he would not see that danger. From the parish chambers I saw troops with guns marching through the streets, two pipers leading them. Others were to be seen leaving by train.

Saturday 8 August

Rain poured heavily all day and we were kept busy taking in the rush of patients from Stobhill. We heard afterwards that our father and mother this morning had realised for the first time the interruption of transport on seeing in a paper that the last boat to be depended on left Belfast that day. Hurriedly packing, they drove miles in an open car in the rain, arriving at Ardrossan at 10pm, having had to answer all sorts of questions as to destination, intentions etc on embarkation.

There were the usual crowds in town at night but no patriotic displays, no processions, flags or songs. Glasgow was taking things very quietly.

Sunday 9 August

There were plentiful bloody details of the fighting at Liege in the papers but nothing new. I was on duty at the hospital and passed the time drawing a cartoon for *Forward*. Boys were selling papers in the streets up till 11 at night, even out Alexandra Parade. One saw the territorials marching out, probably to church parade, but I heard nothing of any special ceremonial in honour of their approaching departure at the churches.

Monday 10 August

Horses were still to be seen being led through the streets, the round white paper stamp denoting military purchase on their hindquarters. The mobilisation and movement of troops throughout the country are kept entirely out of the newspapers, which were padded out with reports of the continental fighting. Kitchener was installed at the War Office; the Irish volunteers, nationalist and Ulsterist, were being taken over by government for home defence. Appeals were posted all over the country, and at every convenient hoarding and wall in town for 100,000 men to enlist. Talk was begun in the papers for formation of a civil guard in Glasgow.

Business was settling down again to make the best of our conditions, and there was less of the excitement consequent to the outbreak of hostilities. Our national stolidness had reasserted itself at the earliest possible moment.

On Friday evening, I took a bicycle run around Kirkintilloch, Kilsyth, Croy and Condorrat. The calm of the countryside at eventide was delightful. I spoke for a time to an Irishman of nationalist leanings. He insisted that the Ulster disturbance was chiefly a 'newspaper' war. He said: 'Why, there's no difference there since I left the old place 19 years ago. They're eating together, sleeping together (the Protestants and Catholics), drinking together and I seen Catholics helping Protestants home that have maybe taken a drop too much, just the same as when I was a boy. But if you'll believe me, the only difference I saw was when young fools were leppin' about in a park with guns'.

Along the country road one saw groups talking together and heard words oddly in passing, 'Germany' and 'war' and 'Belgium' and 'territorials', that showed the universal trend of conversation.

As I came home in the dusk, the lights of the bandstand in Alexandra Park attracted me from the roadside and I was in time to hear the band blare out *Rule Britannia* to the accompaniment of cheering and *God save the King* honoured with usual fervour.

Tuesday 11 August

I was awakened by the monotonous tramp tramp tramp of passing troops at half past six in the morning. A long column of some thousands was marching to Falkirk. In endless repetition, they swept briskly past the windows khaki-clad, knapsacks, rifles and accoutrements over their shoulders. The continuous beat of so many feet in regular time was impressive. After them trailed waggons of all sorts with horses of every variety. Fortunate were the men of the Army Service Corps who would sleep on the sacks piled on their lorries and carts. For most of the men had slept but little. The impromptu barracks were rowdy places, while the night previous they had been busy packing and preparing.

It was told to me afterwards that the sight of them arriving in Falkirk was pathetic, some with boots over their shoulders and barefooted, limping in late at night. Few were fit for heavy marching. The 20-odd mile tramp was too hearty a beginning. Later in the day other parties were to be seen following of ambulance corps, artillery, Army service corps etc. By night the town was empty of uniforms, the streets resumed the appearance of peace. No doubt the departure helped to allay the uneasiness of the public, for the resumption of routine became noticeable. Papers recovered advertisements, prices sank heavily, one forgot to talk of war. Normal interests asserted themselves.

Wednesday 12 and Thursday 13 August

These were days in which the principal war interests took the form of rumours. No intelligence had been published in the press of the movement of British troops. Not a word was printed to give authorisation to the general conviction that our troops were already in Belgium and probably engaged with the Germans. Nevertheless, many stories were told of relatives receiving notice from the war office of deaths at the front. One heard of instances from varied quarters. Then a story spread all over the country of shocking losses to Scottish

battalions. Hundreds were said to be wounded of Camerons and Seaforths while in different stories the Black Watch and the Scots Greys were declared to be 'annihilated' and 'wiped out' and 'horribly cut up'. The newspapers published denials of these stories, though there remained a suspicion that there must have been some ground for the rumours and that British troops had probably participated in the fighting already.

An example, however, of how rumour gallops was the story Mary [Robins' sister] had to tell of Stobhill overflowing with wounded soldiers, the truth being that there were five inmates, two of whom had fallen off horses, two had colds and one had been ill from over-smoking. Meanwhile, there were 10 doctors on the spot and 180 nurses, and 1,000 beds in readiness.

Mary, by the way, had joined the rush to learn first aid and ambulance work and was assiduously attending every night at classes on the other side of the city.

Part 2: Crossing the border

Saturday 15 August

Left Glasgow cycling at 2pm. Pushed through Hamilton to Larkhall. Tremendous industry. Stupendous activity. Enormously productive county. One sees railways, coalpits, cornfields, forests, meadows and foundries, jostling one another within a mile of landscape. Colliers everywhere in dark jackets and dirty corduroys, tied at knees, cans in pockets, oil lamps in cups.

Industry is gradually left behind; dawdles to Lesmahagow and dies away in a wilder country. Climbing road. Wide expanse. Breezy, glorious day of sun and breeze. Made poetry. Took 10 at Lesmahagow. Quiet hamlet with nothing doing at all.

Set out for Abington, 14 and a half miles, Douglas halfway. Noble lord's seat somewhere about, imposing gateway, visible to the naked eye, 20 feet high, with expansive triangle before it, presumably for carriages, and interminable carriage drive vanishing through park. Whole district has taken aspect of a public park. Public road like avenue through Kelvingrove but scenery noble and on grander scale than any park I ever saw. Everything clipped and cultivated like private grounds with gardener in attendance. The very hillsides cropped bare and rolling in amiable dignity-like lawns; the grass among the woods beside the road short, free from weeds and uncouth vegetation. Trees of every description majestic by the wayside in innumerable battalions.

Past this into wildest moorland, destitute of aught but heather and peat grass, courting couples and sheep. Couples cycled out several miles, left machines lying on road and sat a few yards up on grass in full view of public. Why this prominence? Is this to satisfy respectability? Is this the maiden's modesty here, her convention of self-protection, that she must not leave the haunts of men to do her courting even round the corner until an understanding is affected?

Soon not a house within miles. Rolling hills looming round the long long road. Here and there belts of woodland, here and there a farm. Why so few? Surely cultivation, if possible at odd intervals, is capable of extension. Suspect most of this dreary district could be put to use by careful handling, either in farming or afforestation.

Found Abington rather swanky and ran on to Crawford which is only a degree so. Pleasant company in lounge to whose converse I listened from depth of armchair without joining in. Four men, two ladies, commonplace people but in good spirits, laughing at mild witticisms. Lounge separated by red curtains from sitting room where party of local bowlers were celebrating match with neighbouring champions. Never realised before the sublimated seriousness which the game is capable of arousing, as reverential a matter as philosophy, theology or golf, especially when elevated to a loftier plane by spiritual stimulant and an emotional atmosphere of beer.

Sunday 16 August

Left at 10 o'clock after breakfast. Chat with two territorials travelling south on motorcycles. A beautiful run through wild scenery to Beattock. Very few people. A few tramps with long overcoats (for sleeping out), bearded brown faces and gingerly gait, brown sackcloth bags containing their belongings slung over their shoulders. Local gypsies by the wayside performing moving toilet and talking a strange tongue, one of them a young girl of striking beauty with dark skin and fine black eyes. She was combing out her long thick wavy black hair and the rags she was dressed in failed to disguise her charm. The caravan was a primitive ancient-looking contrivance, very dirty and dark inside. They had camped beside the turn of a gaily-singing pebbly stream whose music no doubt charmed their slumbers.

A little ragged barefoot boy ran beside me down a hill, holding in his hands a packet of salt and a stick of toffee. I gave him my hand and speeded him on his way 100 yards and he thanked me through his panting breath as we parted.

Many trains were passing laden with guns, horses and troops who waved khaki-sleeved arms through the windows as they sped by. I am told that over 70 were expected over the next 24 hours. The big guns looked very sinister on the trucks, sometimes veiled with waterproof covering but, for the most part, shamelessly displayed. The horses stared from their waggons pathetically. And, as the men did not know where they were going, they were in no better case. They threw postcards from the windows as they passed through stations, for people to forward.

I stopped two hours at Lockerbie to lunch at the Bluebell Hotel, then passed on from this empty little town to Ecclefechan where I reverently sought out Carlyle's burying place. It was a very simple red sandstone block between two white ones, enclosed in railings among the graves of local townspeople and peasant folk. 'Humilitate' is inscribed above the names of Thomas and his brother. The graveyard is very peaceful, the serene sunlit hills and dignified trees overwatching it. One could muse upon the man, his greatness, his work and his worth, fitly here.

Moving towards Gretna, I soon had a glimpse over the Solway Firth on my right and a bustling breeze to stir my hair, with a view over Liddesdale to my left, level, fertile and green.

I crossed into England, resting to sketch the burn that makes the boundary and dawdled up the long straight road into Carlisle, refreshing myself from time to time with brambles at the wayside. After tea, I strolled over to a socialist club where I was hospitably received and watched a game of skittle pool, conversing with a local town councillor in his shirt-sleeves behind the temperance bar. The last thing I saw at night after I had turned out my light was a band of recruits, 80-strong, marching up the street below my window.

Monday 17 August

Amusing experience last night. Coming upstairs, I noticed maid leaning over the banisters. When she saw me, she gave a squawk and scurried. Mistress came out and apologised. Maid had seen a German coming up the stairs. 'They're seeing Germans all over the place here,' she said.

Hear of great crowds of motor lorries coming from Scotland for war, drivers being taken over by government. Liverpool man says at one time they stretched waiting for use, three miles in streets. He tells me also he heard of wounded coming into Leith. Also he has seen troop ships leaving Liverpool, destination unknown, two every day.

Left for Penrith in blazing sunshine. Hilly road. Delightful scenery. Had a conversation with a young German, ex-waiter from Glasgow, rustivating in remote village here with friend, till war is over.

Had most enjoyable light lunch at Penrith: tomato soup, bread and butter and ginger beer. Cycled on to Pooley Bridge and took steamer to Ullswater and on to Patterdale. Lovely sail. Set off over Kirkstone Pass for Windermere. Terrific climb, pushing bike several miles up steep winding incline. View glorious but so exhausted by perseverance necessary for progress could hardly enjoy it properly. Passed motor broken down by wayside which helped to cheer me up. Reached top at last. Raised a cheer and rushed for a drink at the inn.

Going down was like wine. Scorched at top speed. Enjoyed scenery now. Marvellous! Unbeatable. On right, high mountains. On left, a precipice with peaceful pasture and meadow valley at bottom and steep abrupt mountain rising up out of it. Finest road scenery I have ever seen.

Windermere Lake looked beautiful in calm evening light.

On to Kendal. Pleasant run. Set off after wash in a burn and mild lunch of couple of sandwiches for Kirkby Lonsdale. Miserable run. Heavy series of steep hills that necessitated walking. Evening came down and then night and I had no lamp. Dreary road. Final trial, free wheel began to tremble and bike became at times unmanageable. Fortunately, last four miles were downhill. Scorched in the dark, tyres ripping like mad on the road, wind whipping my face and lungs gulping in air. Exhilarated and inspiring. Reached Kirby Lonsdale just as chimes struck nine.

Tuesday 18 August

Took bike round to have free wheel replaced and it was 11.30am before I was ready to start. Had a chat with housemaid who said she was leaving at the end of the month to join a panto company. Had travelled in Scotland in that line before. 'It's a wonder you never saw my name in the papers. Alice Alderson they call me. I get a guinea a week.' I admitted it was a wonder.

Day was very hot but road uninteresting. No particular scenery except near Lancaster. Solaced myself on the moorland road with numerous brambles here and there among the hedges. Lunched at Lancaster. Uninteresting scenery to Blackpool. Most of it practically flat as a table. Something like Holland but without the windmills. Worth seeing in a way though monotonous. Wind kept blowing in my face and surface of road not too good.

Blackpool (40 miles) at 6 o'clock. Extraordinary place. Crowds, all from Lancashire. Huge tower, tapering into sky, built of girders. Gigantic wheel beside it, winding slowly round and round. Barrel organs. Trams. Motor omnibuses. Tradesmen in white jackets standing at doors of shops booming goods. Open air booths full of sweets and 'rock' in bars a foot long and inches thick, pink, yellow and blue. Booths with fruit. Booths with postcards, mineral waters, collar studs, toys. Oyster shops. Five pence ha'penny shops. Auction shops. Hawkers with coloured balloons, newspapers, matches. Carcasses driven 'naked' in butchers' lorries.

Enormous piers stretching out to sea. White sailed yachts, with owners in blue jerseys and trousers rolled up from barefeet, inviting crowds to come for a sail. Promenade on the front of great width and apparently miles long, worth seeing from above in the evening when the sea is black and lights are shining in water and blazing on long pavements with couples walking briskly along in gay attire. The Palace (admission 6d), a music hall combined with picture house, waxworks exhibition, monkey house and lions in cages, and a dancing hall. The last truly palatial. Gaudy decorations, mirrors and pillars. Large orchestra. Refreshment bars. Beautifully polished floor. Dignified MC. Free and easy conventions. Dancing all night.

It was amazing going round side streets in an evening. Boarding houses galore with tiny front plots in which visitors were sunning themselves on garden seats, papa, mama, big brother and sister, and the baby. All the men in striped shirt-sleeves, even when posing for the travelling photographer. All the ladies in recumbent and strikingly inelegant attitudes. Everybody apparently thoroughly content and enjoying holiday to the full.

Wednesday 19 August

Left about 12 after a walk along esplanade. Sea very hazy and suggestive of heat. Morning crowds perambulating leisurely. Apparently no bathing but there is no beach. Was picked up by a young man a couple of miles outside the town, who accompanied me almost all the way. Most uninteresting scenery. Flat and dull to Preston. After that, paved road all the way to Manchester. Some fine buildings in the middle of Preston. Barracks there which were

empty. A few fine villas outside Bolton. Otherwise, a most dreary prospect of paving stones, brick cottages, mill chimneys and railways for 20 miles. Arrived very tired at Manchester, stabled bike at left luggage office, took a room at Brunswick Hotel, got tea and set out to find A. Falconer at Worsley Road, Winton. Forty minutes or more in tram. Difficulty in finding place; Angus away on holiday. Disappointment. Hospitably received by his landlord and entertained for an hour or two. Back late to hotel.

Thursday 20 August

Awakened at 6am by soldiers marching past with bugle band. They were going to Preston Barracks. Back to bed and slept till 10. Found I have cold in head. Don't know how I got it. Shall hasten out of Manchester (which is a noisy black city and unprepossessing in extreme to individual in my condition) to the green country, Shropshire direction.

Felt bad all forenoon. Messed about wasting time. Had no stomach for cycling. Decided to take train as far as Northwich so had to wait till 3.45pm. Central station waiting room one of the dingiest spots on earth. Who expects better in Manchester?

Left Northwich 5pm. Enjoyed cycling immediately. Ran along Chester Road to 13 miles from that historic town and struck off to Tarporley where I had tea. Two pleasures: I met two Welshmen and I partook of the best penny custard I ever tasted.

Went on through Bunbury (pretty church, quaint houses) to Whitchurch, where I spent night. Delightful run in dusk through Cheshire hedges. Level fields on every side, quaint with trees of every shape, poplars rearing their graceful thin maidenly forms above hedge lines; cows browsing evening pastures; bats flittings; gossips chatting at wayside; clumps of foliage of every shape massed over the road as I sped swiftly through the silent scene.

Lamps were lighting as I swung into Whitchurch's narrow streets and after a clean up I strolled in the dark listening to the strange tongue of the inhabitants, watching boys conduct mimic skirmishes, receiving insight into local cookery (Yorkshire ducks alias spicy puddings) and drinking in peaceful country night.

Friday 21 August

To Shrewsbury. The road turned aside through a jumbled little village with a substantial church that had planted itself right in front of the road so that one had to go round about it. I had to inquire the way several times. Once on the main road, I had a pleasant run up and down quiet byways, singing at times till the cows moo-ed in answer, a questionable compliment. I stopped to refresh my throat, strained no doubt by vocal gymnastics, with plentiful sour blackberries from the hedges.

Shrewsbury was full of soldiers of the Cheshire Regiment who were marching and dawdling, running with pots and with kettles or driving motorcycles, swaggering, plodding wearily, lounging and flirting all over the streets. I saw several ancient houses with black beams and whitened walls. One, The Gateway House, dating from 1613 or thereabouts, formed an entrance (there was a huge studded door, flung back) into a cobbled court where

stood several more modern dignified Georgian brick houses, with climbing creepers, many windows and clean frontages, delightful to survey.

There was a house wherein Henry VII had lodged before the Battle of Bosworth Field. But how petty became these medieval squabbles in this far-off perspective compared with the titanic upheavals of modern Europe, whose echoes and outer ripples were before the eye in even this tiny country township.

The next road was round Wenlock Edge, the outer end of Wenlock Hills, to Ironbridge, a small collection of red brick houses at a river's brink. A hill of remarkable steepness led out of Ironbridge to Madeley, where there was a coal mine. Descending was, of course, more of a pleasure and I was on the way to Bridgnorth soon, enjoying particularly the tremendous poplars by the wayside, which had indeed been a feature of the road from Shrewsbury.

A fortunate hint of a shortcut led me by a back road that missed Bridgnorth to Hoccum Farm and there I settled in for the weekend. In the evening I was taken for a stroll by the two girls of the house and the dog to 'Hoccum Pool' and an early retiral proved welcome to my weary limbs, excusably tremulous after a week's cycling of about 320 miles.

To keep me in memory, I note the inmates of the house, Mr Logan (gey, dour), Mrs Logan (shy, good-hearted, a doormat), Cyril Meredith (a farming pupil, father at farm five miles off in Clavering, boarding school education, Shropshire accent, red-faced, thin, big nose, modest, silent but pleasantly talkative alone, as are they all, curiously enough), Charlie (Irish cousin, tall but lame, shy, silent, probably a screw loose – it was Charlie who spoke of the four Providences of Ireland, meaning Provinces, the butt of the would-be wit of the house, scolded and insulted but neither to be cajoled nor threatened into doing a hand's turn of work, aged 21); Maggie Logan (a big, sonsy farmer's daughter with arms like a man, heavy-footed and loud-voiced, wears glasses, tries to sing occasionally but keeps to two notes, plays piano with elephantine delicacy, has been baulked in life's ambition of becoming an actress so is studying for medicine degree in Glasgow and, having been two months in Queen Margaret's, swanks about 'coll' like a veteran, impudent in the extreme to everybody, especially mother and Charlie, but not to papa who seems to be a Turk for discipline, full of spirits which at present causes effervescence more of conceit than good-humoured fun); Frances Logan (called Frank, tall, good-looking and graceful but is aware of it, sleepy eyes, silent, small pitted mouth, manners to stranger exquisite, to mother, peevish, insolent and insufferable, has no great inclination to talk about anything in particular, seldom reads, a beauty whose charm intimacy dissipates forever).

They were busy making shirts for soldiers and the evidence of industry littered the room all day. Mrs Logan took me into Bridgnorth on Saturday and showed me the church, the castle broken down by Cromwell's cannon, the old town hall, the open market place, the views over the Severn Valley, the sword of the cavalier colonel killed in the churchyard, the curious 'lift' from low town to high town. We made purchases, visited an old Scots couple (retired farmer) and returned in time for early supper and bed.

Talk throughout the weekend was chiefly of the war, news coming in of German advance through Belgium and of impending battle at French frontier in which British troops are to participate.

On Sunday I went to the congregational chapel with Mrs Logan, my first visit to church for about a year. I wrote letters. Mr and Mrs Gray came over from neighbouring farm. We had met them in Bridgnorth on Saturday. Curiously, I had met them at Mrs Wilson's in Sussex two years ago. They had removed to this district. Fine people. Mrs Logan, Mrs Gray and I went for a walk through the fields, passing cut crops lying golden and mellow, awaiting carting to the granary, the rich grassy meadows with their cows and sheep, the tall elm trees whose long shadows fell across the paths, and the silent stagnant pools whereon the moorhens skittered noisily, while rabbits and hares skipped across the path and clumsy partridges rose in convoys at our coming.

The girls went off to their room before eight so I was left alone to finish my letters and to seek repose at an early hour. On Monday morning I strolled into Bridgnorth and in the afternoon, a shower or two of rain having died away, paid a pleasant visit to the Grays' farm, driven in the 'float', a heavy cart for transporting calves etc to market, by Charlie.

I had been getting tired of the atmosphere of the house – especially two things; the girls' bad breeding and unkind manner towards their mother and Charlie, and the ghastly silence at meal times, which was set as an example by the head of the house and religiously copied by the rest of the family. It was too funereal for my volatile holiday spirits. With a bracing of the heart, I contrived to take the plunge of a sudden adieu on Tuesday morning and with extreme joy fled from the farm as soon as breakfast was over. Mrs Logan, with all her shyness, reserve and inability to emotionalise, was kindness itself. The others were too egotistic.

Tuesday 25 August

The wind was favourable again. My luck has been phenomenal. With one or two short exceptions, it has helped me since I left Glasgow. I got to Kidderminster shortly after 10am. There was nothing to see so, pausing only to buy half a pound of yellow plums for a halfpenny, I pushed on to Droitwich, an old-fashioned little place full of those black and white cottages. I made a sketch and I sampled cider – horrid stuff, like vinegar – with regret, and made for Alcester, towards Shakespeare country. Here I dined and rested (in the Royal Oak). There is a delightful church and a general old English air about some parts of the town that made me think of the genial slow stilted and dignified days when Victoria came to be Queen, a town with a Dickens' scent about it, a town of the past but healthy, undecayed and prospering in its anachronism.

The run to Stratford was delicious through (I think) the Arden country. Worcester orchards everywhere, purple plums to be picked up at the wayside and apples peeking red-cheeked from innumerable green trees. Woods too on all sides with thick full foliage, and level meadows, and black and white oak-beamed cottages, beyond computation.

Noteworthy was the frequency of the bicycle, especially among road labourers. A group working with a steam-roller had half a dozen laid beside them in the grass with their coats thrown over them. And in the evening, aged labourers, rheumatically, bent, snow-whiskered, pedalled their tricycles ploddingly homewards from the farm.

Stratford-upon-Avon was, in a measure, a disappointment. Shakespeare's day has been almost eliminated. The town is modern and bustling with tourist trafficking. Half a dozen of the ancient houses have been preserved but they stand in streets all built up as fresh as a new century can make them. There is no repose, no contemplation. To gain an insight into the poetry by a visit to the scenes of a poet's life is vain. The whole district has changed and though still the church of his burial stands by the beautiful Avon, among its ancient headstones, its noble trees, its placid walk by the banks of the stream, the tout stands at its gate, the toll collector awaits within its porch, trippers chatter in its precincts, motor launches flounce about its riverside; only by athletics of the imagination can a dim vision of a sweet grave calm 17th century be conceived by the devout.

Yes, one can faintly create the figure of that greatest of men, faintly see him pottering about the lazy village, for it could be little more, lounging in the scented lanes, strolling by the river, chatting to his friend who settled only a few doors from him, amused by the schoolboys' clatter of games and singsong of lessons in the grammar school near by where he too had spent youthful years, listening to country gossip and farmyard profundities, careless of fame or loud repute, at peace after strenuous manhood. Then a motorcycle thuds by, boys wail newspaper cries, the vision mockingly departs. One strolls along to see Marie Corelli's house as a consolation.

(Marie Corelli (1855-1924), born Mary Mackay in London, began her career as a musician, before turning to fiction writing. She spent her final years in Stratford-upon-Avon, fighting hard for the preservation of the town's 17th-century buildings.)

I had the magnificent honour of seeing her, a little red-faced yellow-haired podgy woman in expensive white, entering her motor. Well a living dog is better than a dead lion (perhaps!).

The road to Warwick was delightful. The town itself was delicious. Everything about it pleasant and suitable, a much more real artistic treat than Stratford. Gateways, narrow streets, ancient houses, placid river, view of castle, winding lanes with houses whose upper storeys overhung the pavement. Very happy here. On through Kenilworth (a modern town, chiefly a residential suburb of Coventry) by delightful highway to Coventry (61 miles), passing 'Peeping Tom' at the entrance to the town.

Wednesday 26 August

Spent a pleasant evening strolling through streets of Coventry. They were crowded, for the town is a busy industrial centre, which has grown rapidly of recent years. New houses had not yet jostled out the ancient oak-beamed cottages that lurked up narrow entries and cobbled lanes in the dim lamplight. The hotel I stayed in was an antiquity, my room was a

garret, with shaky floors and a view over chimney pots; every chamber was entered by a descending step; the stair climbed steeply upwards precipice fashion, while everything about the house was decayed, the linoleum, the wallpaper, the beds, the tablecloths (especially the tablecloths) and by no means least conspicuously the smell of cooking.

In the morning, rain was dripping relentlessly but I set out calmly for Birmingham. My cape protected me and travelling was pleasant. My tyres spurted quietly through the puddles of the soaked road as the rain drizzled silently over the rich green fields and trees around.

Here one passed a big house with its green paddock and broad lawns, there a local builders, a litter of yellow planks piled together with empty barrels and ladders and trestles. Here a cock crowed cheerily from a farm, or birds chit-chattered from the hedges. Always the tyres spurting in the puddles kept a companionable muttering to compensate for the loneliness. A placid agreeable vegetating journey.

Birmingham a busy but prepossessing city, less dirty than Manchester, with many fine buildings. I took a train here to Leeds (after an 18-mile run) and arrived at 3.15pm. A young lady from Stoke (her father was an earthenware manufacturer there, she said) made friends with me and I found myself compelled to treat her to tea while she waited for a connection for Hull. I saw her off and set out for Wetherby about 4.20pm. I saw Leeds in a better light than on my former visit on a walking tour and was impressed very much more favourably than before. Roundhay Park with its lakes and boating seemed a charming spot.

The road to Wetherby soon went by and I passed on to Boroughbridge, a delightful clean old-fashioned Yorkshire market town. I met a young fellow in my lodgings who had been in Rouen district cycle-camping at outbreak of war. He had fled to St Malo with refugees and by good luck escaped to Britain with his friends. He had cycled up from Southampton, doing 100 miles a day. He left for the north after tea.

I strolled around the town with much pleasure in the gloaming and the dark, lighted windows gleaming, shadows passing, footsteps clattering on cobbles. An enticing clean bare old town, with none of the decaying picturesqueness of so much of the south. A town of winter winds and storm swept streets, healthy, independent, sturdy. I sat a while in a little public house back parlour, listening to broad Yorkshire tongues, a great treat. Impossible to reproduce the talk but noticeably there was a vigour and individuality and force about the accents and opinions not readily discovered in the southern talk. There was humour in it too, dry, hearty fun of Scottish sort, the southman has weakly ideas of wit. And the faces were jovial and strong, men's faces. And there was no servility. Men met as equals. It was good company.

There was a menagerie in the village – a group of caravans drawn up in three sides of a square with a canopy spread over to form a big tent, in the front an imposing piece of scene painting with an arched entrance, a platform for the band, and a dozen steps, all lit up with arc lamps whose power was generated by a traction engine gay with polished brass and showy decorations.

People were crowding in and the scene was picturesque in the glare that burst out against the black darkness. A shower came down and I hastened away.

Thursday 27 August

This was a big day of mingled pleasure and regret. An early start gave me the joy of the morning sun and breeze on the spreading acres of Yorkshire. The old Roman Road, the Great North Road, rolled almost undeviating over the long miles, the tall telegraph poles merging in distant perspective into the semblance of a huge fence. Long fields stretched in dark or lighter green or vivid yellow stripes between the hedges. Along the wayside flared vivid weed flowers, yellow dandelions, white daisies, purple clover and thistles, scarlet poppies, blue cornflowers, with many others of whose names I am, alas, ignorant.

At intervals, old hostelrys, relics of coaching prosperity, faced on the once thronging road, their closed stable buildings and grass grown yards witnessing to the activities of former years. Some bore still the signboards of their trade, others had been transformed to farmhouses without quite losing the appearance of old associations.

Catterick (22 miles) with its wide street, its open spaces before the hotels, its general air of breeziness and elbowroom, looked a typical coaching town, one listened for the post-horns and the clatter of hooves. The old clock chimed the quarters sleepily. Only motors sped through and the inns were deserted.

The run into Darlington (13 miles) was pleasant and the town was prepossessingly clean from that entrance. Hot and blazing was the weather as an August day could be, a sky almost cloudless, a subdued breeze.

The exit had led me through a less pleasant side, a more dirty and grubby aspect of Darlington and the road into Durham was disappointing. Coal mines poured their smoke into the air, now on this side, now on that, spoiling the prospect of the well-farmed countryside. The road was full of steep ascents with little satisfaction in going down their other side. I was tired on entering Durham. Still, the cathedral was a compensation. Viewed from every side it was impressive, especially as it rose from the river on a wooded cliff and towered into the sky.

Inside, it was extremely simple with Norman pillars of the heaviest type of solidity, some fine glass windows, some beautiful arches, truly one of those poems in architecture that are our most precious heirloom from the past and whose like we too rarely attempt to emulate in these cheap-jack days. Grandeur and grace in stone, how they strike the chord of emotional appreciation! Strange that the effect of music should be achieved by solid masonry! May the traditions of architectural expression be born again in our civilisation so that our aspirations and ideals may be perpetuated even as those of forgotten Normans and Saxons who builded so nobly in the beginning of our history.

After tea, I set off for Newcastle. It was a dull road with a vile surface. I was glad to arrive. The bridge over the Tyne had a guard of soldiers and a sentry with fixed bayonet. The city is bristling with soldiers, guarding the Tyne no doubt. Newcastle seems quite a fine city

with some worthy buildings and good streets though it is incredibly noisy below my window with newsboys, motor horns, tram bells and general traffic. As my log for the day is 67 miles, I pray for repose.

Friday 28 August

I was wakened by soldiers marching into the station opposite singing *It's a long way to Tipperary* in the early morning, but I soon slid back again to bed and slept on till seven. I wasted no time in getting out of the hotel for my back tyre was punctured and I wished to find a repair shop. I was fortunate enough to find one soon. Here I had a long chat with a Northumberland man who had been 10 years in Canada without losing his burr. He told me of his experiences with the construction gang of the CPR (Canadian Pacific Railway) and his life on ranches and in cities. I must say, the burden of his refrain was of the varied examples of food and catering his travels had afforded him. The picturesque seemed less important than the commissariat to him. He had tried to settle down at home but, hankering after the rough life of freedom, was planning to return next spring.

Passing the large park known as the Town Moor, I saw many hundreds of recruits being drilled with great industry and activity. They marched, counter marched, doubled, halted and marched again in more or less awkward squads, while the brazen voices of drill sergeants rang clamorously over the field. It was amusing to see them collapse on the grass at the readiest opportunity and relax their wearied limbs and backs. And it was evident how much training they would need to become fit for active service against a continental Army.

For a time, I watched cavalry manoeuvring in more spectacular fashion. To see a troop disappear slowly into the distance on their heterogeneous mounts was distinctly bizarre. They enabled the imagination to grasp the significance of real warfare conditions. They gave the impression of an outpost troop, scouting perhaps. Talking together, they jogged quietly past on grey ponies, on black horses, on roans and chestnuts of all sizes, rising and falling in their saddles and grouped, for a few moments, before going from sight, in a jumbled mass silhouetted in rough outline. Easy to understand the trepidation of the non-combatant seeing the enemies of his country, sinister and dangerous. Stripped of gay and theatrical trappings, equipped in the harsh uniform of modern war, they presented a menacing impression of ruthless force inspiring dread.

I rode to Morpeth very quietly and then had lunch, afterwards taking a climbing road to Alnwick. There were glorious views of moorland scenery, of wide windy stretches, heather grown and wooded, of a distant hazy sea beside which a white lighthouse gleamed in the sun, of uplands that seemed the roof of England.

The great sweep of the moor would rise against the sky like land against the sea, it looked like the edge of the earth, as though to pass over the ridge would be to topple into space, so abrupt was the line. There was no distance, and over the close horizon the gaze fell only on clouds. A wild country of glorious colours. To pass here in autumn glory would be a delight.

Alnwick was entered through a stout stone portal, for the ancient fortifications that

protected this adjunct to the castle of Northumberland's duke are well-preserved. Several gateways still stand over the entries to the little town and the castle guards behind it, anachronisms now in these days of explosive besieging, but interesting and picturesque.

I got four miles on the way to Wooler when I was punctured and there was nothing for it but to attend to the damage at once. I carried the machine down to a river's brink and stripped off the tyre to an accompaniment of grieved profanity. After difficult searching, the hole appeared and I took out my solution tube to mend it. The tube had gone dry. I was helpless. Loud and long arose my recrimination to heaven. Further progress was hopeless. I took the four miles back, rather than the 13 miles forward and, after re-inflating the tube six or eight times, plodded back into Alnwick in a shameful retreat. The misfortune was not serious. I reconciled myself to staying overnight in the pleasant little town, and I spent the evening strolling up and down the lively main street, listening to the strains of a patriotic town band ensconced in the room above the gateway, beneath which I had entered for the first time.

Saturday 29 August

I was up betimes. I breakfasted, took my bicycle from the repairers', packed up and caught a train for Wooler, being unwilling to lose the time spent through my puncture. The journey over the moorland was full of glorious scenery and I did not regret it. Rain was falling as I left Wooler and I cycled for an hour in a downpour, making for Coldstream. I had just passed Flodden Field, that spot of ill-omen for a Scotsman, when I discovered another puncture. But I had scarcely time to feel the distress of the affliction when at a blacksmith's door I sighted in passing a cycle wheel and my presence of mind served me sufficiently to ask in an inspiration if they repaired cycles there. In a trice, my machine was being attended to by a smart and tidy apprentice. After the shortest of delays, I was spinning securely off again.

I crossed the Tweed into Scotland with a thrill of joy. I felt at home again! The view here was full of dignity and a grave beauty. Scotland prepares a worthy reception for the traveller entering her gate. The calm Tweed flows beneath a fine bridge, past trees and fields, the village of Coldstream overhanging the banks.

I cycled to Kelso under a clearing sky and left the rain behind as I sped by the winding Tweed. Now and then a view of some old castle uprose by the wayside reminding of the warring days of early history; with often a pretentious modern mansion neighbouring it across the river, the home probably of the present day heir of the old family, and offering in the contrast of opulent luxury with rugged crudity, a striking lesson in history and change of social conditions.

From Kelso, I rode to St Boswells (neglecting Dryburgh Abbey and Abbotsford, both off the main road) to Melrose, where I visited the abbey, a red sandstone ruin much carved and once, no doubt, of considerable dignity. Thence I strove over a steep hill to Galashiels, then through a long pass to Innerleithen and at last to Peebles (60 miles).

The scenery of this run was, perhaps, the most magnificent of the whole fortnight. What countless hills! What glorious fields and valleys! What colour and variety! And what beauty of the gleaming winding Tweed with its reflections and placid calm and peace! It was a fitting termination to a glorious tour and I took the train home, full of a deep satisfaction and content with a well-spent holiday, such as I have never had before.

The bare platform

Sheila Hetherington

2009

Willows, willowherb and grass... A day or two ago, I waited for half an hour on the small, otherwise almost empty, platform at Evesham, to board a train to London and a return to Scotland. I felt dreamy, indolent, vaguely conscious of pleasurable warmth and lively birdsong. Something reminded me – perhaps the terrain, which was a profusion of willowherb, meadowsweet and untamed grasses, on the banks beyond the platform – that the village of Adlestrop could not be far away.

Adlestrop: immortalised by the poet Edward Thomas in his evocation of a hot, lazy summer afternoon at the end of June 1914, when his express train halted unexpectedly and without explanation at the little station at Adlestrop. 'No-one left and no-one came on the bare platform.' The engine of his train hissed. He listened to a blackbird close by, 'and round him, mistier, farther and farther, all the birds of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.'

I link Edward Thomas with his near contemporary, George Butterworth, whose lyrical music, such as *Banks of Green Willow* and *A Shropshire Lad* evokes and inhabits a similar landscape of Englishness, and of that lost world of 95 summers ago. Viewed from the perspective of life today, that world seems to have been idyllic – a slow, gentle world of ripening cornfields, of horse-driven ploughs, of milk in churns, of children in white pinafores and hats, of endless sunshine.

It was not, of course, idyllic. There was grinding poverty. Many people lived in miserable conditions, others suffering deep personal anxieties. Terrible wars had come and gone throughout recorded time. But it seems as if the years before that year of 1914 define an innocent age: an age before this planet became 'global', descended into insane periods of horrendous violence, its population becoming ever more cruel, more greedy, an age before too much knowledge on the part of mankind became irreversible and uncontrollable, with an ability to destroy itself at the touch of a button. Perhaps remarkably, however, most of us live gratefully, gladly, optimistically, with personal delight – and for much longer.

Both Thomas and Butterworth, with nine million other young men, were about to lose their lives in the war that was only weeks away when the express train stopped suddenly that afternoon at Adlestrop.

Why I wear a poppy

Alex Wood

2009

As a young man, I wore my CND badge rather than a poppy on Armistice Day. For very different reasons, my father, a regular soldier from July 1939 until 1946, also avoided both poppies and Armistice Day: 'I don't need a special day, I remember my pals who died every day of my life'. My father's father had enlisted in the TA in June 1914 and re-enlisted in 1939. He also, I am told, was contemptuous of the Earl Haig Fund which he saw as providing military funerals for veterans but of having failed to support veterans when they hit hard economic times.

Today I wear my poppy.

It is partly because I visited France and Flanders. I saw High Wood where my paternal grandfather attempted to rally the remnants of two companies after all the officers had fallen, only to be wounded himself and for the advance to peter out. I visited Brown's Copse Cemetery where my maternal grandfather lies, with countless other Scots. I visited the vast, austere German cemetery at Neuville-St Vaast, powerful also because of the graves of Jewish German soldiers, marked by the obligatory pebbles. How, I wondered, did the occupying German servicemen of the Second World War view these reminders of sacrifices made by men whose children were then being sacrificed quite differently? On the day on which I visited Neuville-St Vaast I also visited Cabaret Rouge Cemetery where lies Sergeant David Glen, M M.

Glen, like my grandfather, was a Brechiner who played junior football for Brechin Hearts. He then signed for Brechin City on its foundation in 1906 but also played briefly with Dundee and Millwall. Glen worked in the stone quarries, on the farms and in the bleachfield at Brechin and at road-mending. Glen might have been another anonymous casualty but for his football.

Glen was a physical footballer in the days when that was no disgrace but when diving for a penalty would not have been imagined. Glen's fame was as the man who cycled 20 miles to play for City. As a boy, I knew that story but imagined it was a player who lived in the country: far from it. In the days when the working week was five and a half long days, labouring men loused on Saturday lunchtime. While labouring on the roads, Glen would cycle to work and home on a Saturday prior to playing. On one occasion, while working at Invermark, his bike broke on the return journey. He walked part of the way but still turned out for City.

Glen was a local worthy, shrewd in his judgements, highly-respected and humorous. He was awarded a testimonial by Brechin City in 1912 and was a regular for Brechin every season from the inaugural campaign of 1906-07 until 1913-14. He played in the Brechin

teams which won the Northern League championship in 1907-08, which contested the final of the Qualifying Cup in 1908-09 and which won City's first ever silverware, the Forfarshire Cup in 1909-10. His Qualifying Cup finalist's medal and his Forfarshire Cup winner's medal have a deserved pride of place in the boardroom at Glebe Park.

Davie Glen was described as 'a gentlemanly player, feared by all his opponents for his robust style of play'. In a match against Dunfermline Athletic, the Dunfermline centre half was one Brown, who 'jumped to head the ball at the same time as Glen... Brown was carried off the field unconscious. Glen rose to his feet, put his hand to his head, gave it a shake, went off – at first in the wrong direction! – with his clumsy but determined stride, to play out the game without a finger raised for remedial attention'.

Davie Glen enlisted in December 1914 in the 13th Royal Scots and arrived in France in August 1915. On Easter Sunday 1917, the British and Imperial forces launched their offensive around Arras. Glen, by then a sergeant, was killed on the first day of that battle.

David Glen had been awarded the Military Medal for bravery (notification of which award only reached his mother a few weeks after his death) and had been recommended for the Distinguished Conduct Medal on several occasions. The major commanding his company wrote to Glen's mother after his death. 'It did not take me long to see what a magnificent soldier your son was, and I always was confident that he would do his duty. He not only fulfilled the duties of a platoon sergeant, but he took a keen interest in the welfare of the whole company. One always found him working or supervising work in the trenches to improve the bad conditions for the men. It was not necessary to tell Sergeant Glen what to do every time we went into the trenches, for he had so carefully studied how to improve existing positions to be able to carry on. He was a tower of strength and many a time I have seen him helping others to carry their loads, when they were exhausted. We played football together, worked and fought together and I always found him a most capable and fearless leader.'

Almost accidentally, some remnant of the story of Davie Glen remains and I wear my poppy for him. I wear it with some sorrow to mark the disappearance of the solid, small town virtues and loyalties of men such as Glen. I wear my poppy for the countless dead on all sides for whom there is no known story. I wear it for the German (and the Jewish) Davie Glens in Neuville-St Vaast as much as for my grandfather's compatriots in Brown's Copse. I wear it for the human potential, obliterated in war after war before it could be realised. I wear it, not to glorify war, but because I stand humbled before suffering and endurance beyond any ever asked of me.

An apology for an event long ago

Russell Galbraith

2013

1.

Recently, the president of Germany, Joachim Gauck, made a special pilgrimage to a small town, deep in rural France, to apologise for something that happened there on a warm summer's day long ago. He told reporters: 'I want to reach out to the victims and tell them, I am at your side'.

What happened at Oradour-sur-Glane ranks among the worst atrocities of the Second World War. Yet, outside France, it is barely remembered.

Oradour, much like hundreds of other towns scattered across the vast French countryside, had been largely unaffected by the fall of France in 1940. People worked on neighbouring farms or in Limoges 15 miles away. The presence of a large number of refugees, which included defeated republicans, who had been driven from Spain following the civil war, and Jewish families who had been forced to abandon their homes in the Lorraine because of Nazi persecution, point to the essential goodness of the place and the decency of its inhabitants.

For all we know, some people living in the neighbourhood of the town had never encountered a German soldier in the whole of their lives until the afternoon of 10 June 1944 when a detachment of SS disturbed the peace of the place.

The soldiers who arrived in Oradour on 10 June 1944 were members of an elite group known as Das Reich – the most notorious SS Panzer division in the whole of the German Army. Their commanding officer was SS-Major General Heinz Bernhard Lammerding – a dedicated killer who believed in making local civilian populations pay dearly for the actions of the resistance.

2.

The day before Das Reich appeared in Oradour they'd left their mark on Tulle, a small town about 70 miles to the south. There, following an amazing battle involving a group of resistance fighters and the local German garrison, the partisans succeeded in taking control of the town. It required a visit from the battle-hardened men of Das Reich, aided by heavy tank support, to win it back.

General Lammerding responded to the loss of three of his own men in the final shoot-out by hanging 99 civilian hostages from lamp posts around the town. In a vile mood, he watched some of the executions from a pavement cafe, drinking wine and listening to martial music. It is possible, of course, that General Lammerding meant to execute more people that day: an auditor might think 99 is an untidy figure, difficult to justify. Put simply, the catalogue of murder ended when his men ran out of rope.

The following day, shortly after lunch, the first soldiers wearing the insignia of the 2nd Waffen-SS Panzer Division Das Reich arrived in Oradour-sur-Glane – and began surrounding the village. SS Major Adolf Diekmann, who commanded the unit, was a ruthless and efficient officer who enjoyed the complete trust of General Lammerding. He told the mayor of Oradour he was looking for weapons and links to the resistance. It would be necessary, he said, to check everyone's papers.

The mayor assured Major Diekmann there were no weapons in Oradour and nothing to connect anyone living there to the resistance. If necessary, he was prepared to offer himself and his four sons as hostages while the soldiers conducted their search.

3.

By chance, 10 June was a Saturday, market day, when people who lived in the surrounding area visited Oradour to shop and meet friends. It was also the day the locals collected their tobacco ration. Diekmann made no attempt to distinguish between natives of Oradour and those who were simply visiting. And once his men were in position, there was no chance of anyone who wished to escape, such as an active member of the resistance, slipping through the net.

All the people they could find – men, women and children – were collected at gunpoint and forced to assemble on the village green. Women and children were separated from the men and taken to the church. The men were mustered in small groups and escorted to various barns and sheds, where they were kept under the watchful eye of soldiers armed with machine guns.

There was no immediate panic. The people of Oradour evidently believed what they had been told: the men of Das Reich were engaged in a routine search and documents check. Before too long, the senior officer present would declare himself satisfied and leave without harming anyone.

The first hand grenade, thrown perhaps by Diekmann himself, alerted the guards to begin the slaughter. The men of Oradour died first, most of them where they stood. However, in order to ensure there was no mistake, the various sheds where they had been taken were set alight with the dead and dying still inside.

Other guards set fire to the church where the women and children had been imprisoned. Anyone who tried to escape the smoke and flames was shot. By the time Major Diekmann finally ordered an end to the killing, 648 people were dead, both sexes, all ages.

4.

Of all those taken to the village green, only six people were left alive. Five men managed to conceal themselves among the bodies of their friends and neighbours. One woman, 47-year-old Marguerite Rouffanche, escaped from the blazing church by climbing through a window behind the altar. She was badly wounded and it's a miracle she survived.

If you include time spent on a systematic search for survivors and their immediate

despatch, the massacre took perhaps an hour to complete. Many of the bodies found inside the church were reduced to ash. The dead included a baby barely a week old, as well as a large number of other children. Whole families were simply wiped out. Major Diekmann then issued orders for the town to be destroyed. By early evening, Oradour-sur-Glane was a smouldering shell.

No-one can explain the degree of thoroughness with which Oradour-sur-Glane was searched, then destroyed, or why Das Reich felt it necessary to murder the entire population. Two rumours persist. One claims General Lammerding had been entrusted with the safe shipment of a large consignment of Nazi gold which had been captured by members of the resistance operating in the vicinity of Oradour the previous day. Another suggests Das Reich were engaged in a desperate search for a German officer, SS Sturmbannführer Helmut Kampfe, commander of the 2nd SS Panzer reconnaissance battalion, who'd disappeared and was believed to have fallen into enemy hands. Neither story, taken singly or together, begins to justify the horror of what happened.

5.

An inquiry conducted on behalf of the German high command, following a complaint from the French Government based in Vichy, concluded that the men of Oradour had been killed in a firefight involving Das Reich and a group of partisans. A large number of women and children sought refuge in the village church, hoping to escape the battle raging outside. They perished, and their bodies had been reduced to ash, the report explained, 'as the result of an explosion from a nearby insurgent ammunition supply dump that ignited inside the church'.

Lammerding always claimed that Diekmann – who had been killed fighting in Normandy a few weeks after the massacre and couldn't argue – exceeded his orders and was responsible for what happened at Oradour. A tribunal which met in Bordeaux following the war sentenced him to death in his absence for the hangings at Tulle. But by then he was living in Dusseldorf under the protection of the forgiving British who refused requests for his extradition; allowing him to enjoy what one source called 'a successful entrepreneurial career' until his death in 1971.

The German authorities have been able to trace several members of Das Reich who were present at Oradour on 10 June 1944 and a number of prosecutions may be pending. In 1981, an East Berlin court sentenced SS Sergeant Heinz Barth to life in prison for his part in the Oradour massacre. Released in 1997, he died 10 years later, aged 86.

It was General de Gaulle who ordered that Oradour-sur-Glane should remain as Das Reich left it. A new town has been created close to what remains of the old village. On a recent visit I was told that young people, burdened with present-day horror stories from the likes of Rwanda, Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, simply want to forget about the Second World War. They believe the memorial site, which attracts 300,000 visitors a year, and costs the national exchequer 150,000 euros a year to maintain, should be put to another use.

The President of Germany, who was accompanied by the President of France, Francois Hollande, promised others would be told what he'd seen on his visit to the massacre site. Germany as it is today, Herr Glauck proclaimed proudly, was a different country from 'the one that haunts their memories'.

6.

Robert Hebras, a former mechanic now aged 88, and one of the last living survivors of the massacre, attended the visit by the German President. He told reporters: 'When I come here, I see faces, people, not ghosts'.

In the memorial cemetery, a large granite block with gold letters is adorned with a photograph of Madeleine Bois. A small shy smile flickers around her mouth. She is dressed in a smart new coat, and she sports an outlandishly large ribbon in her hair. As she stares straight ahead, evidently unfazed by the camera, her eyes are bright with hope. Born in 1935 (the same year as the author), Madeleine Bois died at Oradour on 10 June 1944. It's hard not to be moved.

Dachau

Kennedy Wilson

2013

Cheap air travel has opened up a range of unlikely destinations. Bored with Prague or Barcelona? Can't decide which destination to choose? You might opt for a long weekend in Munich. As capital of wealthy, conservative, hard-working Bavaria, it's certainly not the place for stag night revels. Once you visited the cathedral and art galleries, you might consider a day trip to Dachau.

The countryside from the train window is a little dull on the 25-minute journey to the charming small country town of Dachau. It might be somewhere in the home counties with its leafy streets and hanging baskets. I get the connecting bus to the concentration camp memorial site and feel distinct trepidation alighting at the other end not knowing quite what to expect.

At the information centre – a modernist concrete and glass structure – I pay a small charge and get an audio guide (entrance is free). I leave my passport as a deposit, a whispered echo of the identity papers surrendered by the first arrivals 80 years ago. A tree-lined walk leads down to the main gate. Discreet interpretation boards don't quite prepare you. The gatehouse has a watchtower and picked out in wrought iron work is the chilling maxim 'Arbeit macht frei' (work makes you free).

There is a vast parade ground and low one-storey buildings all round. The first was the former reception centre where detainees were processed and is now a museum. There is an example of a desk with a sliding top with sections revealing the original, neat index cards recording names, ages and what treatment is to be meted out. The museum consists mainly of display boards and hanging banners.

The audio guide fills in more detail including first-hand accounts. A few cases contain objects (not the vast vitrines full of prosthetic limbs and suitcases I was expecting). One contained shaving implements used to shave the heads of newcomers. Another had examples of chinaware made in one of the factories. The museum is busy yet no-one speaks. At one point, a mobile goes off like a jingle at a funeral.

Only a fraction of the full Dachau complex is open to the public. The rest was used as factories and medicinal herb gardens operated by slave labour. Many of the S S former barracks and admin buildings are now out of bounds (they are used by the Bavarian riot police).

The visit should be revelatory or redemptive, but in reality, it leaves open more questions. Was this pure evil? Was this the inevitable outcome of rabid, corrupt nationalism? Could it have happened anywhere had the conditions been right? Has anything been learned about this dreadful place? Stories of forced labour and cruelty

continue throughout the world from the torture chambers of Kazakhstan to human rights abuses in China, genocide in North Korea to gas attacks in Syria. Better minds than mine have grappled with these questions including Dachau survivor Bruno Bettelheim, the pioneer of child psychology.

In his book *Surviving the Holocaust* Bettelheim made the point that the pseudo-science of eugenics alone 'could not have wrought such havoc in human lives, had it not been paired with a ruthless and heartless technology which concerned itself only with efficiency never mind the human cost'.

After a while, the voice in my ear and banners about the atrocious conditions, the malnutrition, the overcrowding, the random beatings, the countless Jews, gays, gypsies, indigents, Jehovah's Witnesses, Czechs, Poles, Russians, Catholic priests, intellectuals, communists... gets too much. Halfway round there is a film show – the monochrome story of Dachau.

This was the first concentration camp, a prototype for all the others. Lessons learned here would be rolled out across Germany and Poland. Inevitably, the film brings tears. The piles of dead, the degradation and the final liberation. When the film ends, it's good to get out into the sunlight. There is a giant modern sculpture by Nandor Glid: oversized barbed wire that morphs into hands reaching for the sky.

I cross the parade ground in warm sunshine and spot a young couple who have two whippets and go over to say hello to the dogs – incapable of harm and uncomprehending of the significance of their environment they provide, oddly, some sort of humanity; a break from the tension. And despite all the facts laid out in cold black and white, the place still feels sanitised, the real horror left to the imagination.

The barracks are next – inside are even rows of rough wooden bunkbeds like giant orange boxes. The unrelenting audio guide explains all: the overcrowding, the deaths in the night from exhaustion and malnutrition, medical experiments, the outbreaks of typhus. It's a relief to walk along the 'camp road' lined with poplar trees. Only two reconstructed barracks survive, the rest are represented by foundation stones looking like oversized graves and so many of them. It all goes to show the industrial scale of Dachau where there were 1,780 interned Polish clergy alone. In the 12 years of its existence, over 200,000 people from all over Europe were imprisoned here and 41,500 were murdered.

At the end of the avenue stand a number of large religious memorials: Catholic, Russian, Protestant, Jewish. Beyond this, nestling in a grove of trees and shrubs, is the crematorium. It looks like a little summerhouse. Only the huge chimney and ventilation grilles on the roof tell another story. The practicality of the architecture is chilling.

Park benches offer a place to take the weight off your feet and people-watch. Who are these visitors and why have they come? I overhear a family – they are Israeli – including two young teenage boys dressed formally, unlike many others who come in holiday clothes of shorts and t-shirts (one boy wears a bright yellow t-shirt bearing the words 'psycho killer').

The respectable Israeli family with two sons in long trousers, collars and ties pose for pictures taken by their father. The crematorium building is in the background. Had they lost some relative here? A shady path through trees seemed to offer a place for visitors to wander, compose themselves and gather their thoughts before heading for the exit. But there is no respite. Large concrete stones are engraved with references to the blood ditch at my feet, for this was where inmates too ill to work or be transported would have knelt, been shot in the back of the neck and fallen into the shallow ditch before being removed to the nearby crematorium. Other areas are pits where the ashes were dumped.

A quick walk round the prison block and I leave through the iron gate, the gate so many people never walked out. I take a desultory look round the gift shop; it's mainly books but there are also some religious nick-nacks (Christian-symbol keyrings and Jewish menorah candelabra).

The visit takes a sombre three hours and has been physically and emotionally exhausting. Dachau leaves an indelible aftertaste. Even the name seems angry if you spit it out when you say it. There seems something wrong about having lunch in the cafeteria. I'm not hungry but plenty of others are. A specials board advertises fish 'n' chips and apfelstrudel washed down with Coke or macchiato. I can't help thinking of the starving inmates with their thin gruel and mouldy crusts.

The bendy bus takes me back into town. Almost all my fellow travellers go straight back to the railway station. I decide to look around the lovely dormitory town of Dachau itself and wonder why someone didn't change the name. Lunchtime life goes on. The mini-market has a special offer on tights and Colgate. An estate agent's window offers a house for sale for around 300,000 euros. The coffee shop is filling up. It's all delightful: little shops, leafy main street and BMWs parked by the kerb.

I walk up to the Altstadt – the candy-coloured old town – at the top of the hill and find the town hall, police station and museum painted in bright colours like giant French fantasies iced in pink and green and yellow. A large mansion, Schloss Dachau, and its Italianate gardens of fountains and flower beds, offer views of Munich off in the distance and sleepy Dachau village down below. Alles klar [all right], as they say in Germany.

At last we found each other

Morelle Smith

2013

Several years ago now, I began research to find out where my grandfather died. My father said that no-one knew exactly where it was, somewhere in France or Flanders was the only information given. Like so many who died in the First World War, the place of his death remained a mystery, an unknown. There's something about unknowns of that nature that never quite lets you be. Or so I felt.

In retrospect, it's surprising that my father, a man of great determination, not someone to give up easily once he had decided on a course of action, did not research his father's history, and find out more. But only in retrospect. He would not have known just as I had not known, that it was even possible. I only found out through a chance remark made when I was teaching a beginners' French class for adults.

An older man in the class told me had been successful in tracing his uncle's grave near Arras. He told me to contact the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) and I would be able to find out from the battalion's log book exactly where they had been and where he had died, if it was known. It might have been very simple from then on, even though I had only two pieces of information, my grandfather's name, and the fact that he had died right at the end of the war, or so I remembered my father saying.

I enlisted the help of a friend who is a genealogist, to find the important details about my grandfather, such as date of birth, and date of marriage. My first attempt took me to the Scottish National Memorial, housed in the grounds of Edinburgh Castle. But my main problem was his name, William Smith. You might be surprised – I certainly was – at how many young men from Scotland with that name died in 1918 alone.

I pored through the records, and thought I found at least three possibles, born in Edinburgh. But how could I know which one was him? By a process of elimination – the place of birth and other information held about the casualties – none of them fitted. I then turned to the excellent CWGC website but again, none of the names proved to be his. I felt I'd reached a dead end and I gave up. It did not leave me though, that sense of the unknown, of the not being able to be known; it accompanied me, surfacing in my mind from time to time.

A few years later, in 2011, I tried again. This was a direct result of reading Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, her memoir of the First World War. Vera Brittain's book should be required reading in all schools. That's what I felt, after I'd read it. I went back to the websites and I also contacted the CWGC both by email and by phone. They were kind and helpful people but they could not perform a miracle. My grandfather was not listed in the casualties of 1918. They suggested looking in the notices of deaths in the local newspapers.

So I began the search, scrolling through each day's newspaper, on microfiche, for the notices of deaths in 1918. Even with magnification they were so old and yellow and the print was so faint that they were very hard to read.

Searching for 'casualties – rank and file', I came to know my way around the papers – the deaths were usually on page six. The list of contents were usually, but not always, on page three. I imagined how black the ink must have been, almost a century ago. Now it was so faded it was almost indecipherable. Sometimes the relevant column was smudged and unreadable.

I felt as though I was trying to peer across time into a faint, blurred and distorted world. But most of all, I felt all that was not said among these columns of tiny printed facts. Troop movements, the wounded, the casualties. The unreality of facts. What lay behind those words was something I did not want to think about. My eyes began to ache and so did my wrist, from turning the screen handle. To cover two or three months had taken several hours, and there was always this gnawing sense that I might so easily have missed something.

I was out of the country for some time, and when I came back, the thought of returning to the microfiche was not appealing. The task was daunting, though I kept trying to exhort myself to go back to it. But there were plenty of other things to keep me occupied and provide excuses for not going on. It was only through a chance conversation with my sister that an astonishing fact emerged: that our grandfather had not been killed in 1918 but towards the end of 1916 or the first part of 1917. She was sure of this, because a birthday card was sent to our father, a very young child then, in the summer of 1916. But there was no card sent in 1917.

So I went back to the websites of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the Scottish National War Memorial. And to a whole different crop of William Smiths. Sometimes there was no other information given at all, but at others, there were terse little numbers, date of birth or date of death, or occasionally, place of enlistment, and sometimes even the names of parents. It would have helped if I'd known what regiment he was in, but I did not.

By eliminating those whose other details did not fit, I was left with two, whose scarcity of information meant that they were possible. They were both in the Royal Scots so I phoned up the HQ in Edinburgh Castle, giving the relevant numbers, as well as the details I knew about my grandfather – his date of birth, and his address. The response was almost instantaneous. The extremely helpful person I spoke to called me back saying he had found a newspaper clipping with date of death, address, photograph. He emailed it to me. Along with his service record, with details of date of marriage, dates of birth of children, all of which tallied.

As soon as I saw the photograph, I knew it was him. The search was over. I'd tracked him down. He had died on 17 November 1916. Not right at the end of the war as I thought my father had said, but right at the end of the battle of the Somme. The day I made the phone call was 14 November.

The next task proved easy, now I knew who he was. The CWGC lists the sites of all known graves and memorials. I very much wanted to visit it. It was the idea of going to that place, that spot on earth, that precise location that my father had never known but had wanted so much to know, that had spurred me on in the first place. That landscape, that earth, where my grandfather had been, where he had last been, and, so it felt to me, where he was now.

I discovered that his grave was in a cemetery in Picardie, to the north of the small town of Albert. In a couple of weeks time, I was due to travel to Strasbourg via Paris. With a bit of juggling, I calculated that I would be able to visit the cemetery near Colincamps, on the way to Strasbourg.

I didn't sleep much on the night coach to Paris. It was only after the boat trip from Dover to Calais, only hours later, somewhere in Picardie, I fell asleep. And when I woke up, the sky was that grey and grainy shade when colour struggles to be discernible from darkness.

From Gallieni, where the coach arrives, I take the metro to Gare du Nord, changing at République. From Gare du Nord there's a TER, a regional train, that goes to Albert via Amiens, where I have to change. As the morning gets lighter, the sky is bleakly grey. The trains pass through a landscape weighed upon by grey and heavy skies. But somewhere between Amiens and Albert, the sun comes out. When I come out of Albert station, it's windy, but the sun is bright in a clear sky.

I had imagined this journey so many times, hoping that I would not be too tired, that the train schedule would be the same as the one I'd viewed online, that nothing untoward would slice a blade between me and my goal – strikes, gales, snow, ice, breakdown of bus or train, getting lost, getting on the wrong train – so many things that could go wrong, especially when I was tired and the world of dreams was merging with the waking one. Reality was softened and pliable, and had no clear signs about it to make it obvious that this is the hard-edged world, the one with strict timetables and granite definitions.

And now I was here in Albert, where I had imagined myself to be, heading for the office de tourisme, which I had contacted a few days before. The only way to get to Colincamps was by taxi, I was told. I had also imagined a flower shop on the way, reassuring myself that every small town in France has a fleuriste. And so it was, a small flower shop where I select a pot of red roses.

Three people are working behind the desk in the tourist office but there are no tourists in early December. Apart from myself, clutching a pot of roses wrapped in patterned cellophane. The taxi is called and arrives in five minutes.

I tell my story to the taxi driver because I must. We drive through flat countryside, the sharp lemon light stings my eyes and it becomes blurred, all these green fields, stripped trees, with waving needles of dark branches, and the ploughed earth the colour of damp sand. As if the sea could not be far away, you know this because of the gentle gradient of fields, the colour and texture of the earth, the way sand looks just after the sea has left, and turned into horizon.

The day is fierce and windy, the sunlight flashing, palpitating. When we reach the cemetery, as I walk through the rows of stones, there are several people there, which I did not expect. They all seem to be working here, armed with secateurs, rakes, pushing wheelbarrows. I have to shout to make myself heard. I'd imagined such a silence, such an emptiness, a contemplation and stillness, not this clashing orchestra of wind and sharp light, and these people going about their normal daily tasks, in the middle of this preternaturally wild and walled-off place.

I know which area to go to, the plan of the cemetery was on the website and I'd studied it beforehand. But I enlist the help of the gardeners because I cannot ignore them and I have to tell my story yet again, and one of them sets off to look as well, and I say G, row G, and the wind whips at least half of the sounds out of my mouth. But I find Area 1 and row G, and some way along the row there he is, or there is, rather, the stone engraved with his name, regiment and number and date of death and I shout out to the man, I've found him, I've found it, it's here, *je l'ai trouvé, voilà, je l'ai trouvé...*

The wind whips my hair over my face so that the sunlight flashes and falls, flashes and vanishes like lightning strokes. And the trees wave wildly in the wind, the sun slanting hard against the rows of stones, spears of sunlight hitting weathered stones and shafting in between the rows and lines of stones and the peace of this plot of land with its guardian trees. The small areas of earth in front of the stones, many of them planted with roses, the neat edges between earth and grass.

And the gravestone is close to the trees at the top of the cemetery, close to their overlooking presence, and so, almost a century later, in this sun-struck gentle-looking countryside, here we are you and I, at last, we have found each other.

My silent summer nights with the fallen

Michael Elcock

2013

After the autumn ploughing, chalk slicks stain the surface of the fields, tracing the zigzag lines of old trenches. There are graveyards here, tombstones standing thick as corn where the young soldiers fell: in the corners of fields, in villages, beside streams and woods and farmyards. Perfect rows of crosses stretch over hillsides: black ones for the German dead, white for our side. There must be more crosses here than any place on earth. – From A Perfectly Beautiful Place

Morelle Smith's account in the *Scottish Review* of her search for her grandfather among the dead of the Great War was compelling reading. It's a driven thing for some of us – to know where we have come from; to try to get a sense of who our forefathers and mothers were, and what happened to them.

After an exhaustive amount of research through histories and military archives, my wife – the writer Marilyn Bowering – and I spent the summer of 1981 in Flanders and Picardy. We camped on the battlefields, and picnicked on baguettes, tomatoes, cheese and wine in the graveyards with the fallen. We thought that they would not have minded; might have welcomed the informality and the thoughts we sent their way.

We were following the trail of my wife's grandfather, Edward Grist. Edward was a Barnardo's boy. Born in London, his parents died when he was 10 years old. When he was 12, Edward and one brother were sent to Canada. There he was indentured to a farmer in a remote part of western Ontario, and he worked from dawn to dusk on the farm, for little more than food and shelter, until he ran away when he was 14.

When the First World War came, Edward joined the Canadian Army. He joined up because he desperately wanted to get back to find his brothers and sister in England. The Army, and the war, offered the only way for him to do that.

Edward was put into the First Canadian Division. In some respects, he was fortunate because the four divisions on the Canadian Corps were generally well-trained, and well-officered. In fact, the First Canadian Division is considered to have been one of the most successful military units in any of the Allied armies. Its main tactician, General Arthur Currie, was a territorial; not a regular soldier. Not well known today in Britain, Currie was arguably the most brilliant of all the Allied generals in that awful war.

The First Division achieved most of its objectives including, with the three other Canadian divisions, the capture of Vimy Ridge. Over the previous two years, Vimy Ridge had cost well over a quarter of a million French and British lives. In 1917, Haig handed the task to the Canadians. After a period of meticulous research and planning by Currie and his

staff, the Canadians took the ridge in less than 24 hours, at a cost of 3,500 dead and 7,000 wounded.

Edward was an infantryman. Before Vimy he had fought at Sanctuary Wood and Hill 60 (both near Ypres), and at Flers-Courcellette in the Somme. After Vimy Ridge he fought at Hill 70, at Passchendale, and in the Luce valley near Amiens.

All of these battles were dreadful – some of them more unspeakable than others – and tens of thousands of soldiers failed to survive any of them. Edward survived them all, although he was wounded twice. The second time, a bullet through a lung during the push eastwards from Amiens in 1918, saw him invalided to England. Up until he died in the early 1960s, Edward almost never spoke about any of it.

That summer brought the most extraordinary, visceral experiences I think I have ever had. In the silent nights, lying under canvas in those fields where the soil had been fertilised by so much blood, there were visitations. I am sure of it. I had the most vivid dreams of my life.

Marilyn's fine, extended poetry book about that war – *Grandfather was a Soldier* – is out of print now. But one other result of those researches was a beautiful, ageless play that came from her book. Produced by the excellent Patrick Rayner for BBC Radio Scotland, it featured actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company and music composed by David Dorward. It was broadcast on Remembrance Day in 1982. It must still lie somewhere in the depths of the BBC.

Much wonderful literature has been produced about the First World War, and the poetry of soldiers like Owen, Sassoon and Gurney is transcendently evocative. But Morelle Smith is right when she says that Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* should be required reading by every child in every school. Preferably before they reach the age of 16, an age at which they are now apparently being recruited into the British Army.

The bees did not take sides

Bob Cant

2014

1968 has been the only year since the Second World War when no British military personnel were killed on active service. That was one of the results of the decision of Harold Wilson's Government not to send any troops to Vietnam. Rather than staying in Britain to be what Mick Jagger called a 'street fighting man', I spent the whole of 1968 teaching in a secondary school in Northern Tanzania. That was also the year when I stumbled upon evidence of the harshly fought campaigns of the First World War in German East Africa.

I was based in the port of Tanga, where seagoing dhows regularly left the harbour for Arabia and the Persian Gulf, as they had done for centuries. Tanga had been one of the major centres of German East Africa, but apart from some distinguished buildings, there were few traces of the 33 years of German colonial rule; there were fewer physical traces of the subsequent 43 years of British rule but they had at least ensured that the English language was the medium of instruction in the secondary schools, largely funded by church missions or Asian philanthropists.

I was amazed one day to find myself in a small German cemetery near the centre of the town. Most of the graves were of young German men who had died in November 1914. Even as a history graduate, I knew nothing about the First World War in German East Africa but I soon learned that the Battle of Tanga had begun with an attempt by British forces to take control of their enemy's colony from the sea.

British forces outnumbered Germans by eight to one but their leadership was very complacent and the commander, Major General Arthur Aitken, had no previous experience of military activity in Africa. A kind of gung ho incompetence ruled the day and troops were needlessly deprived of sleep before landing on the Tanga beach.

Hives of very aggressive bees were disturbed during the three-day battle and they stung some of the soldiers as many as 100 times. British Intelligence claimed that this was a German plot but all the evidence suggests that the bees were non-discriminating in their attacks. The pain – and the humiliation – they inflicted was sufficient for the battle to be known in common parlance as the Battle of the Bees. The official report of the war described the battle as 'one of the most notable failures in British military history'.

The Germans, led by General Paul von Lettow-Vorbek, not only held on to Tanga for two more years but continued to wage campaigns against the British and their Allies right up until 25 November 1918. One of their aims was to keep large numbers of Allied troops well away from the main theatre of war in Europe and in this they succeeded.

The numbers of casualties are difficult to ascertain but it seems likely that 10,000 British

troops and 2,000 German troops were killed. Approximately one million African civilians were conscripted as carriers and this resulted in major depopulation and food shortages in the areas where they came from. Disease was widespread and as many as 95,000 of the British carriers and 350,000 civilians may have died.

A poem by the Cornish-born Owen Letcher, who fought with the British forces for the duration of the war, expresses some of the sense of awkwardness that these soldiers felt about their role in an overlooked front.

*Perhaps the blokes in Flanders our little bit will scorn,
'Cos we've never had an order that gas masks must be worn,
And we've never heard a 'nine point five' or Hymn of Hate at morn.*

*And would you like anopheles and jigger-fleas and snakes
To 'chivvy' you from dusk till dawn, and fill you up with aches'
And then go on fatigue all day in a heat that fairly bakes?*

*So don't despise our efforts, for we've done our level best,
For it wasn't beer and skittles, those two years without a rest,
And though the world forgot us, we think we stood the test.*

I recently discovered that there was more than one war cemetery in Tanga. The Tanga European Cemetery has 29 Commonwealth burials from the First World War; these include two Scots – Lieutenant George Adams from Dumbarton and Sub Lieutenant John Elder from Clarkston in Glasgow. The much larger Tanga Memorial Cemetery has the names on a screen wall of 394 troops who are presumed dead; they came from the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, the Rajputs, the Kashmiris and several other Indian regiments. Only 270 were recovered from the scene of the Battle of Tanga and, in those pre-DNA days, there was no way to distinguish one set of remains from another. As a result, there are 270 graves containing the unidentified remains of individual soldiers.

The cemetery that intrigued me most, because I had seen it, was the German one. There were 16 troops buried there and the oldest of these was 48-year-old Captain Tom von Prince. Von Prince was half-German and half-Scots and he had played a key military role in the establishment of German power in the colony in the 1890s. Some of his defeated enemies from the Wahehe tribe had given him the nickname of Bwana Sakarani (the wild one). He had taken this as a compliment and when he set up a tea plantation in the Usambara Mountains, he had called it Sakarani plantation; after his death at the Battle of Tanga, the cemetery had also been named Sakarani in his honour.

What all three of the cemeteries had in common was that they contained no African names. It is believed that at least 400 people were killed at the Battle of Tanga. German records say that 55 of their casualties were askaris (African soldiers) but I have found no

similar record for the British troops. African deaths have simply not been acknowledged in any of the cemeteries.

General Von Lettow-Vorbek prided himself on the enormous loyalty which he said his askaris felt; he put this down to the vigorously Prussian military training which they had received, as well as his fluent command of Kiswahili. When he returned to East Africa in 1953, he was feted by scores of these troops, singing an old colonial marching song, *Heia Safari*, to welcome his presence among them. (*Heia Safari* can be seen on YouTube with suitably colonial imagery).

Von Lettow-Vorbek was not the only German to appreciate the support of their askaris. In 1964, the Bundestag, in an apparent wave of prosperous post-holocaust guilt, decided to offer back pay to any surviving askari who had fought with the Germans during the 1914 war. Paper documentation was so rare that they had to find a way to identify genuine claimants from imposters. Finally, they hit on the idea of giving applicants a broom and asking them in German to perform the manual of arms; their meticulous military training was such that they all remembered what to do 45 years after their regiments had been disbanded.

Just before I left Tanga in December 1969, I became aware of an elderly Tanzanian man singing militaristic songs from the First World War outside expatriate watering holes. We were able to recognise that he was not singing the Kiswahili translation of *It's a Long Way To Tipperary* – *Tipperary Mbali Sana Sana* – and eventually we realised that the songs he was entertaining us with were German in origin.

Perhaps, he was one of von Prince's men? Or one of Lettow-Vorbek's loyal followers? Or one of the Bundestag pensioners who felt that he was owed some more compensation from the Wazungu (Europeans) who had fought their battles in his country? There is no way of obtaining answers to any of these questions. All we know for sure is that he had survived the war in German East Africa.

The moral of all this is that if we are going to commemorate the outbreak of wars, we ought to reflect on the totality of war; we ought to pay heed to all those who lost their lives, even if their names or the precise locations of their remains are forgotten or unknown.

The Cossacks should have known better

Michael Elcock

2014

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation carried a short clip on the national news the other night of Cossack security personnel at the Sochi Olympics inflicting a casually vicious beating on the members of the Pussy Riot group. I imagine the UK news channels carried it as well. It was nasty, and very difficult to watch; big, tall men in uniform thrashing defenceless young women with whips and batons.

The Cossacks might want to reflect a little on their history before they offer too much in the way of services to the Russian Government. It may have been a while ago, but the events of 1945 in a little place called Judenburg must surely have been as seminal to Cossacks as the events of 1692 in Glencoe or the post-Culloden genocides were to many Scots.

Tens of thousands of Cossacks who had fought half-heartedly for the Wehrmacht surrendered to the British Army at the end of the Second World War in the valleys of southern Austria, trusting themselves to an innate British sense of honour and fairness. But none of them knew about the secret Yalta Agreement between Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin; that all Soviet citizens were to be repatriated to Soviet custody when the fighting had stopped.

The British tricked the Cossack leaders into separating from their men, and then disarmed them. They penned nearly 1,500 Cossack officers in a specially constructed compound at a place called Spittal, and then told them they were to be repatriated to the Russians in the morning.

The Cossacks hated the Russians, who had displaced them from their traditional lands north of the Caucasus 20 years before; they had taken up with the Germans for reasons of survival. The Cossacks had no illusions about what this 'repatriation' would mean for them.

The devastated Cossacks held an Orthodox church service at five o'clock in the morning, the singing 'quite magnificent' according to a British officer who was there. They knew what would happen to them when they were handed over to the Russians. The British soldiers knew too, and so did the British Government of the day.

At least a dozen Cossacks committed suicide before the British soldiers managed to force them into the trucks which drove them up to the border at Judenburg. More Cossacks killed themselves by leaping into the deep boundary gorge near the station, as the soldiers forced them onto the bridge and over to the waiting Russians.

The British soldiers couldn't see what was happening in the territory controlled by the Russians on the other side of the river gorge, but all through that night and into the next day they could hear bursts of gunfire. It was the sound of Soviet firing squads dispatching

the troublesome Cossacks, and it was accompanied by the singing – as one witness said later – of the most beautiful male voice choir he had ever heard.

The forced Cossack repatriations went on for two more weeks. Next to go were the common Cossack soldiers, the rank and file, and the rest of the 'train' – the women and the children. For this was not an army, it was the wandering exodus of a people. Like the European armies of the 18th and early 19th centuries, war to the Cossacks was a communal business; their families came too, carting their possessions with them.

During these chaotic post-war months, the Cossacks had been living in a kind of diplomatic 'no man's land' between the Allied armies, for this was one of the places – like the River Elbe, and Berlin – where the western and eastern Allies had demarcated their territories, their zones of control. Stateless and uncertain, the Cossacks had simply stopped where their war had ended. Once here though, they had gradually established – for the first time in years – schools for their children, churches, newspapers, supply distribution systems; the first trappings of a settled existence.

This second wave of Cossacks refused to obey the orders of their British custodians to march peacefully over to the Russian lines, and the men formed a protective circle around the women and children. Then, on orders that came directly from the highest offices in London, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders attacked the unarmed prisoners. A number of Cossacks were killed by the Argylls; others committed suicide, some with their whole families. Many threw themselves into the swollen river and drowned. In the end, with the Scottish soldiers on the verge of mutiny at such craven orders, the Argyll's colonel refused his brigade's command to use more force.

It is not known how many Cossacks died that day on the British side of the bridge, but it was almost certainly several hundred. Altogether, some 50,000 Cossacks were forcibly repatriated to the Soviets during this shameful passage of European history, most to execution, the rest to a deathly exile in the Siberian prison camps. It's a story that has been quietly buried, a tragic story of a few short weeks in Austria in the spring of 1945; a tale of international power politics at its moral nadir. The Cossacks should know better than most that what goes around, comes around.

How did my grandfather make sense of it all?

Bob Cant

2014

My grandfather, Robert M Reid, was 35 years old when the First World War began. Having spent much of his free time over the previous 15 years with the Forfarshire Royal Garrison Artillery (Volunteers), he must have seemed an ideal recruiting sergeant for young men volunteering to leave Carnoustie to fight in the war to defend Belgium.

But there was more to him than military experience and those other experiences stood him in good stead. He was well known – and apparently well liked – in many community circles. He had his own small business as a master coachbuilder and he was an elder in the United Free Church. His wife had been a bootmaker but on her marriage she became a housewife.

Other members of his family shared his Presbyterian work ethic and one sister emigrated to South Africa, one brother to New Zealand, one sister-in-law to California and another to Canada; despite the distance, the ties remained strong and they were a family that valued the British Empire. He was one of the first people in Carnoustie to own his own car. His mother had died in a fire, possibly as a result of her drink problem, and, while he was not a teetotaler, he was abstemious about alcohol.

When his wife was hospitalised (with what we would recognise as post-natal depression), he did not farm my mother out to one of his relatives but, unusually for a man of that period, he took on major responsibility for the care of his only child; the resulting bond between them remained strong until the end of his life. His general willingness to take on responsibilities helped to make him a man that people trusted. In the first 18 months of that war, trustworthy and responsible men all over the country persuaded the sons of their friends, colleagues and employees that the war against the Kaiser was a war that needed their support.

By March 1916, the government decided that they would have to introduce conscription. Many of the men who were volunteering were not fit enough to fight, although they did introduce bantams regiments for men who were too small for traditional soldiering. After the disastrous loss of life at the Dardanelles, some men were less keen to volunteer than their older brothers had been.

Despite the fact that this country was never under any real threat of invasion, the government turned into a war machine. Procedures were established to deal with men who sought exemption from military service. While the vast majority of these applications were from men who were in protected occupations, a small percentage (2.13%) was from men who had a conscientious objection to going to fight a war. These 16,000 men – 'conchies' – became the objects of abuse from the war-supporting public, both at home and on the

Western Front. It was a clear example of the ways in which governments can scapegoat small, non-conforming minorities in times of national conflict.

The government would have been increasingly aware that soldiers on the front were becoming critical of the war effort. We now have access to the war poetry of active soldiers like Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg, sickened by the destruction of the war. The Dundonian poet, Joseph Lee, wrote about a sense of solidarity he felt with German prisoners of war:

*And how you stooped as men whose strength was spent
I knew that we had suffered such as other
And could have grasped your hand and cried, 'My brother'.*

Pat Barker's novels have alerted us to the attempts to cure men, such as Siegfried Sassoon, of their mental health problems so that they could return to France to fight. But the pain and the madness of the men on the front never combined with the grief and the bereavement of the people at home to form a politics that would hold their leaders to account for their murderous war policies.

Just months before the end of the war, *Despised and Rejected*, a novel by A T Worsley, about a group of bohemian pacifists, some of whom were homosexual, was published. *The Times Literary Supplement* said in a review: 'As a frank and sympathetic study of certain minds and character, it is of interest; but it is not to be recommended for general reading'.

The Director of Public Prosecutions decided that, despite its small print run, he wanted it banned altogether. The publisher was charged, under the terms of the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), with producing a book 'likely to prejudice the recruiting of persons to serve in His Majesty's Forces'. Conviction followed and unsold copies of the book were destroyed. The law had been used to demonstrate the idea that 'conchie' were both anti-patriotic and homosexual – doubly unspeakable. The conduct of the war had been all about holding a line, and perhaps the rationale for this prosecution was that a line needed to be held against the proliferation of non-conforming values.

My grandfather, like many others, strove to return to some kind of stability and normality after 1918. There is no record of any thoughts that he might have had about the trial of *Despised and Rejected*. He continued to be involved in community life. His business did well and he spent many summer holidays with his wife and daughter at the annual conferences of the National Blacksmiths Association.

He did not think that there was any point in women pursuing further education because 'they would just get married' and so my mother, despite her own ambitions and those of her teachers, left school at 15. But he was very supportive of the voluntary work she did with the Girl Guides. He valued the use of the Scots language and did what he could to make sure that various words and phrases were not allowed to die out. Towards the end of his life, he became a very warm and fondly remembered grandfather.

A rather grand war memorial was erected in the centre of Carnoustie in 1926 showing the names of approximately 150 young men from the town and its hinterland. Most of them had signed up for regiments with some local connection, such as the Black Watch or the Gordon Highlanders. In a town of 5,000 people, the names of the dead represent 3% of the population. All the townspeople would have known several of the commemorated men and be reminded of their shortened lives every time they looked at the memorial.

I spotted the name of an 18-year-old golfer, the elder brother of my mother's closest friend. Was there some comfort to be had by this public acknowledgement of loss, even if expressions of individual grief were discouraged? Small towns often imagine themselves to be a microcosm of the wider world and, in that sense, I can understand the sense of trust that they showed about the war in 1914-1915. But after the Dardanelles and the Somme, their perception of events becomes impossible for me to comprehend. Perhaps the war memorial acted as a totemic substitute for unarticulated anger.

1922 was the year when British electors began to express their desire to be ruled by people with more interest in social justice than had been shown by the coalition of warmongers. Winston Churchill was defeated in Dundee by the prohibitionist Neddy Scrymgeour and all over the country Labour MPs were sent to Westminster. Carnoustie, like so many other small Scottish towns, never identified with that wider leftward turn.

However, the Tory MP for Forfarshire, Captain Shaw, was defeated and replaced by James Falconer, a Liberal from Carmyllie with a strong interest in land reform and social insurance for unemployed farm workers. Even after the devastation of the Great War, Forfarshire's awakened social conscience still had a local focus.

Will I return to George Square?

David Donnison

2014

As an atheist who has opposed most of the wars we've got into in recent years, I rarely go to commemorations of Armistice Day. But, recalling lost comrades of the Second World War and curious to see how Glasgow would respond to this 100th anniversary of the first, I got the train to Buchanan Street, walked through Queen Street Station – courteously declining the offers of poppy sellers – and entered George Square in good time.

There was a modest but respectable crowd – between one and two thousand people I guess – surrounding a space in front of the cenotaph where there were small detachments of soldiers, sailors and the British Legion. I eased my way to the front, through white and bald heads. They looked like veterans of the Second World War and subsequent conflicts – the Malayan 'emergency', the Korean War – and some had brought younger men and a few women; their children and grandchildren I guess. But there were practically no school children. And not a single black or brown face.

We waited in damp and chilly silence. Eventually, a distant bugle could be heard playing the last post. Then a Christian hymn and a faint voice saying some sort of prayer. There was no amplification, so no words could be heard. I wasn't even sure whether these sounds came from within the square or some neighbouring street. After half an hour, the crowd began quietly drifting away – disappointed I felt. Will they come back next year? Should they?

The night before, I had been to an altogether different commemoration in the Royal Concert Hall. After 40 minutes of solemn Beethoven and Elgar, the second half offered us words put together by Sir Andrew Motion, our last poet laureate, accompanied by Sally Beamish's music.

The words were those of men who had cracked up in the holocaust and been treated for what in those days was called 'shell shock'. (Officers I guess: other ranks who did this were more often shot.) They described war in simple but horrifying detail. A battalion marching in smart uniforms and perfect formation – not one breaking ranks – for every man to be mown down by the machine guns.

Days later, in no-man's land, the rats running in and out of holes in their dead bodies. The routines of the 'psychological' treatments that broken survivors were given: the 'hate room' in which they were told stories of the worst atrocities alleged to have been carried out by Germans. Sally Beamish's music meshed powerfully with these words. I left in silence, deeply awed.

So will I come back to the cenotaph next year? I will if we are offered white poppies – creation of the Peace Pledge Union – along with the red ones, and the wearers of both feel

welcome. I will if families of Indian and Pakistani heritage feel able to join us and their priests and imams are invited to speak – people whose fathers and grandfathers died in their thousands to defend the British Empire in two world wars. Poles too – now our second largest foreign-born minority – who suffered a more murderous war than any of us.

I will if our teachers bring their classes from primary and secondary schools to witness and reflect on the day. I will if a speaker from the German consulate is among those who address us; recalling, perhaps, the exchange of greetings and gifts that took place in no-man's land on the Western Front at Christmas time, 1914, as the working classes of the warring nations rebelled for an hour or two against those who compelled them to kill each other. (The generals on both sides made sure that did not happen again.) The story of a football match played in no-man's land may be apocryphal but it should be kept alive: myths are often more revealing than the truth. I will if someone has something fitting to say to us, and we can hear it.

I don't want to exclude those who come to pay their respects to brothers, fathers and grandfathers who died in any of our wars. (My own father fought in both world wars and miraculously survived, and I believe that he, with millions of others, helped to make not only Britain but the whole world a better place than it would have been if the Kaiser or Hitler had won.)

If that's the kind of Remembrance Day we are offered – and I'm still here – I'll be coming.

57,000 reasons to remember

Bob Cant

2016

I still rub my eyes in disbelief when I read the numbers of British casualties on 1 July 1916 – the opening day of the long planned Battle of the Somme. 57,000.

This article attempts to give voice to some of those who were fighting in what proved to be the largest battle in the First World War on the Western Front. It draws on a variety of sources – letters, diaries, contemporary newspaper accounts, memoirs and taped interviews recorded many years later for the Imperial War Museum.

The original aim of the Allies had been to mount an offensive against the Germans on several fronts but when the Germans attacked Verdun, the French concentrated much of their efforts there. The British then focused on the River Somme, in north-east France, and were supported by troops from all over the empire, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, Newfoundland; the Indian Army sent cavalry but, as trench warfare developed, they proved to be ineffective; soldiers from the British West Indian Regiment were not allowed to take part on an equal footing with white soldiers and were limited to labouring duties.

The military activity was organised on an industrial basis; or, more precisely, the way industry had been permitted to develop a century previously before the intervention of various Factory Acts. Soldiers were regarded less as human beings and more as expendable, replaceable units. The kind of camaraderie which had marked the pals' battalions in the earlier part of the war was no longer valued.

Private Donald Cameron, 12th Battalion, York and Lancaster Regiment, gives us an account of the day before the main offensive began:

On June 30th, the Corps Commander, General Hunter-Weston, made a speech saying we were superior to the Germans in arms, artillery and everything else. He said that by the time our artillery had finished bombarding their trench and we went over, we'd be more or less on a picnic. The regimental band played, When You Come to the End of a Perfect Day.

Cameron's account of events in the first hour of the offensive on 1 July is of a different order altogether from what they had been led to expect. The Allied commanders detonated their explosives 10 minutes before they launched their actual attack and this gave the Germans time to ready their machine guns.

The first wave went over at 7.20. The night before, they'd laid tapes, showing us the way to the cuts in the German wire. But when we went over, these tapes were missing, so we headed off in what we thought was the right direction. We'd been told that we had to walk at arm's length from each other, and that's how we started. But not for long. When we saw people dropping like ninepins on either side, we bent double, and in the end we started crawling. After a while, four of us got down in a shell hole. It must have been about eight o'clock. The firing went on, and we kept peeping up, looking over the top to check, and the bloody Germans were sniping our wounded. They were even firing at the dead. They couldn't see us in our shell hole. I used to go to church when I was a lad, but I prayed more in that shell hole than I prayed in church.

The scale of human destruction was beyond belief and some regiments lost the majority of the troops that had taken part in the offensive that morning. Captain Montgomery of the 9th Battalion, Royal Irish Rifles, tells of the sense of devastation he and the survivors in his regiment felt on their return from action.

Not a few of the men cried and I cried. A hell of a hysterical exhibition it was. It is a very small company now. I took one hundred and fifteen other ranks and four officers (including myself) into action. I am the only officer and only thirty four other ranks are with me now out of the one hundred and fifteen.

The need for mass burials had not been foreseen. Lieutenant Norman Collins was made responsible for this task with the 6th Battalion Seaforth Highlanders:

After the attack I was appointed burial officer and told just to get on with job of burying the dead. I had a squad of men to help me, carrying the picks and shovels, and also stretchers. Of course, some of the men were picking up their brothers and cousins and they of course were very upset, very very upset... In a Highland Regiment, there were many men from the same family, village or town. I mean some of them were obviously crying... it was a horrible thing to do, to have to bury your own cousin or brother.

After the failure of the first day, the troops fought from their trenches for the next four and a half months. The impasse was extremely tense and conditions were frequently very muddy.

Sergeant Charles Quinnell, 9th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, explains some of the detail involved in maintaining the trenches.

There was always some digging to be done. The sides of the trenches were always giving way especially in wet weather, and you would find that perhaps during the night the side of the trench had come in. Well, the trench had to be built up with sandbags filled with earth. There was always something to do at night-time. There was the ration party, there was the water party, there was a wiring party, there were patrols.

The German troops were in no better situation. The name they gave to the Battle of the Somme was the 'Bath of Blood'. Stephen K Westman, German Army Medical Corps, describes the conditions in their trenches.

For seven days and nights we were under incessant bombardment. Day and night. The shells, heavy and light ones, came upon us. Our dugouts crumbled. They fell upon us and we had to dig ourselves and our comrades out. Sometimes we found them suffocated, sometimes smashed to pulp. Soldiers in the bunkers became hysterical. They wanted us to run out, and fights developed to keep them in the comparative safety of our deep bunkers. Even the rats became hysterical.

Food of a substantial nature was a problem. Bully beef, which was very similar to corned beef, was widely used. The fact that it was contained in tins made its distribution very straightforward. It was less than popular with the troops and Lieutenant W S Dane of the 4th Battalion Seaforth Highlanders wrote an ode to bully beef.

*The hours I spend with thee, dear friend,
Are like a nightmare without end.
On you alone for life I must depend
My Bully Beef! My Bully Beef!
Each tin a meal, each tin a groan,
There's gristle, fat and ground-up bone,
I finish up each tin and then –
A biscuit comes alone.*

Warfare generated all kinds of difficulties where decisions had to be made on the spur of the moment and the results were not always favourable to anyone. Corporal Harry Fellows of the 12th Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers, describes one situation where he made what proved to be a wrong choice.

One of the new lads went down the traverse, two shells fell on the trench and he was buried. All we could see of him were his legs kicking. I got hold of one leg, my mate got hold of the other, and we pulled as hard as we could but we couldn't move him.

We started scrabbling away with our hands, but he'd stopped kicking. When eventually we got him out, he was dead. The strap of his steel helmet was under his chin, when it should have been on the chin. The helmet had trapped in the earth, and in pulling his legs, we'd pulled his neck out. The lad who'd pulled the other leg said, 'My God, we've strangled him. We've murdered him'. We never even knew that lad's name.

By mid-November, after 140 days, Allied troops had advanced six miles, at a cost of 415,000 British casualties, 200,000 French and 600,000 Germans. The experience of the Somme, however, did not dissuade the military leadership from further battles of attrition. The following year, a similar battle took place at Passchendaele; it was renowned for being muddy for the whole three months.

Even after the battle was over, soldiers felt a sense of responsibility to the families of their dead comrades. Private William Hay of the 1/9th Battalion, The Royal Scots, made a promise to his closest friend in his dying moments.

My pal Alec went down to the HQ and one of these blasted heavy trench mortars dropped where he was. He was very badly mutilated. When he was dying, he said to me, 'You will tell my mother – won't you?' And I said, 'I will'. I was devastated. I had lost my pal. Anyway, I went home on leave to see his mother. I told her about how Alec died, and she said, 'You're not telling me the truth!' I told her he was shot through the heart, you see. I couldn't tell her he was... I said I was with him when he died. So she accepted that, and she gave me a great big bag of cakes. She worked in a baker's shop.

Violet Jacob, the Montrose poet, lost her son, her only child, on the Somme. Some years later, she published a poem she had written about him; her tone is one of restrained dignity. That was the approach that many people used to try to make sense of a war beyond sense which they had survived; others, whom they had loved, had not.

To A H J

*But miles on miles from Scottish soil
You sleep, past war and scaith,
Your country's freedman, loosed from toil,
In honour and in faith.*

The end of it all

R D Kernohan

2018

This year will bring the most significant and heartfelt of the commemorations of the First World War when Remembrance Day comes on the Armistice centenary. It will both contain and surpass the pity, horror, historical reappraisal, and deeply-rooted folk-memory aroused by the commemorations that retraced the way from the naiveté of 1914 to the grisly realities of the Somme and Passchendaele.

There are other names that mingle grief with pride and anger, not least for Scotland those of Gallipoli, Loos, and Arras. But there is a still more terrible and nameless battle – or continuous series of battles with forgotten names – that ought to be remembered from 21 March if we are properly to commemorate the Armistice that ended it.

It began with what seemed the most shattering defeat the British Army ever suffered. It rolled on through the spring and summer of 1918 into the most costly and (once peace came) the most squandered of great victories. The Army took 3,200 casualties a day on the Somme, 2,300 a day at Third Ypres (Passchendaele), but nearly 3,700 a day in the last decisive 100 days of the extended battle that began on 21 March.

On that day of 'shock and awe', after the Bolshevik revolution allowed German concentration on the Western Front, began the desperate German attempt to win the war before the Americans made their belated presence felt. In these early stages of the continuous battles casualties were even higher, swollen by vast numbers of 'missing' from the shattered British Fifth Army, most of whom turned up as prisoners. But there is grim argument among statisticians about whether the British forces lost more dead in the 10 months of 1918 than in the fearful year of Passchendaele – it was certainly more than in the year of the Somme. They probably did if losses in the 10 'Dominion' divisions are added to the 189,000 recorded for UK soldiers, for this last battle was (more than any that preceded it, even Gallipoli) one in which the British Empire displayed a unity and coherence it never achieved again.

There are many historical arguments still being waged over these battles of long ago. Some are about the politics of war, notably the fraught relationship between a flamboyant Welshman and a taciturn Scot. The Prime Minister, Lloyd George, wanted rid of Douglas Haig as British Commander in France but never managed it. He did manage to hold back in Britain substantial numbers of newly trained troops – he feared Haig would waste them – at a time when the British Army's front was being extended and its ranks were depleted by the terrible losses of earlier years. Inevitably, the arguments about this policy have ever since been tangled with those about how far poor leadership, inadequate planning, and bad luck were mixed in responsibility for the successful German onslaught westward of St

Quentin which began the long last battle.

These arguments, begun by politicians and old soldiers but continued by professional historians, have sometimes taken precedence over more significant facts about the last phase of the war, some of them obscured by the dark shadows of the Somme and the Ypres salient. One is that, after 21 March, the 'siege warfare' of the trenches gradually gave way to a campaign of movement – even more costly because heavy fighting was more continuous. Another is that the British Army was changing in both shape and character. War-weary as it was, it had the most prominent role in the last great battle because the even wearier French were still more depleted and the Americans were only beginning to make their impact.

But it was no longer Kitchener's Army of enthusiastic volunteers – not just because enthusiasm had been replaced by endurance but because half the men were conscripts and half the infantry lads of 18 or 19 (my own father among them in the final stages). And the infantry, who bore the worst of the losses, were a smaller proportion of an Army which had bulked up its artillery, developed new technical specialisations, and had discovered tank warfare and air support.

Yet this terrible phase of war and dramatic episode of our history is not etched in national consciousness in the way that has been done by earlier indecisive battles and even conspicuous failures like the Dardanelles and the first day on the Somme. At the time the British people, like their soldiers, were war-weary. They had perhaps heard too many tales of victories that came to nothing and lived with too much mourning to recognise the succession of successes that led to real victory as German morale gave way in the face of defeat, both in the high command and on the home front. Afterwards, the memory of the Armistice, with its sighs of sorrow as well as relief, blotted out much that led up to it.

A century later, the military historians revel in both the detail and the controversies, often taking a much kinder view of Haig and of his armies' staff work than more popular writers. There are also rich archival collections of letters and of diaries, official and very unofficial. There are the dull divisional histories and livelier battalion ones. But the last great battle is overshadowed in the general literature of the war, as well as in the folk-memory which it helped to shape, by the long bloody stalemate which preceded it.

Some of those who contributed most to that literature were dead: Charles Sorley of Aberdeen, Julian Grenfell, and Edward Thomas among them. Isaac Rosenberg was killed a few days after 21 March. Even Wilfrid Owen, who survived till almost the eve of the Armistice, had written his poetry before he opted to go back to France in 1918. Of the 'war poets' who lived to see peace, the most famous were spared the final battles or were unfit for them. Robert Graves, sore wounded on the Somme, was in an Irish garrison, Edmund Blunden had been sent home to a training post after two years' front-line survival. Siegfried Sassoon returned from banishment in Palestine but was soon wounded by 'friendly fire'.

There are some memoirs of simpler souls who survived the final ordeal but the two most significant literary contributions which it inspired are, incongruously, from men whom

wounds or sickness had relegated to home postings. Henry Williamson, best known for *Tarka the Otter*, had been out in 1914 with the first Territorials and was gassed in 1917. If he was in France in 1918 it was only briefly, probably as escort for a draft. But he reconstructed the battle in *A Test to Destruction*, part of his long semi-autobiographical series of novels. R C Sherriff set his drama of doomed trench endurance, *Journey's End*, on the eve of 21 March, but a severe wound at Third Ypres had ended his active service.

A Scot may be tempted to put the closing chapters of John Buchan's *Mr Standfast* on the same plane but, though that neglected book is an important part of First World War literature, the closing chapters on the German offensive are its weakest part. Buchan had a good view of the 1918 campaign – as seen from headquarters – but his brother's death at Arras in 1917 had left him sick at heart. Perhaps the best Scottish literary contribution to the literature of the 1918 battles is the account by Stephen Graham, best known as a superb travel writer, of his survival in the constantly thinning and refilling ranks of the Scots Guards.

Some vivid glimpses of the last great battle are visible in the memoirs of survivors who made a later mark on the world. The most notable is probably the politician Duff Cooper, who was culled from the Foreign Office into the Grenadier Guards and, who like Graham, conveys in simple narrative the cost of the final months of victory.

But the most telling summing up of the way an almost exhausted British Army and war-worn people relegated the victorious 'test to destruction' of 1918 to the back of their minds is from an unexpected quarter. Anthony Eden is remembered as a rather aloof and eventually very fraught politician. In retirement, he wrote a warm and moving book about his early years, rich in reflections of the Somme and of old and lost comrades of all ranks. He survived to be a brigade major through the ordeal of 1918 and gave it two paragraphs.

Something similar happened in the British people's collective memory of the First World War – a memory which has been immensely stimulated by the centenary commemorations so far. Before the last of them, there should be a greater appreciation of the terrible price exacted in the months before the guns went quiet on 11 November. Those soldiers who survived them, and those who didn't, deserved well of their country.

A vital message from the front line

Howie Firth

2018

It was the war to end wars, they said, but when the bugle sounded for the Armistice, it was only the end of the beginning, the start of a chain of events that would lead to a Second World War and to border tensions that continue today.

And there are so many 'what ifs'. What if Kitchener, for instance, had not set off for Russia on *HMS Hampshire* on 5 June 1916 and lost his life along with almost everyone else aboard? We picture him today in the recruiting poster, the Secretary of State for War, who created an army for an unprepared nation and sent it into battle in the trenches, to fight as fiercely as he had fought in Sudan and South Africa. But in both of those earlier conflicts he also negotiated a peace that was fairer than it might have been.

That was a point made by his former chief staff officer, Sir Ian Hamilton, in 1922 while unveiling a war memorial in Scotland just three years after the settlement of Versailles – where, he said, 'our politicians entirely ignored the ideals of those to whom we have raised this memorial by making a vindictive, instead of a generous, peace'.

But in contrast: 'Lord Kitchener forced them to make a good peace in South Africa. For six months Lord Kitchener fought the politicians who wanted to make a vindictive peace, an "unconditional surrender" peace as they called it, a peace which would above all things humiliate and wound the feelings of the conquered... he beat them and made his own peace; a generous soldierly peace'.

And indeed, it was a peace very unlike that imposed at Versailles. In South Africa, there was no levy on the Boers to pay for the costs of the war: indeed, there was a payment by Britain of £3m to help with reconstruction.

As to what might have happened at Versailles if Kitchener had lived, there is Lord Derby's account of their conversation together, just three days before the fateful voyage: 'There was only one thing that he really hoped to live for, and that was to be one of the English delegates when peace was made. I asked him whether, saying that, he had any strong views that he would want to put forward and he said he had one very strong one, and that was, whatever happened, not to take away one country's territory and give it to another. It only meant a running sore and provocation for a war of revenge to get back the ground so lost. He was most emphatic about that...'.

Kitchener's career had begun in the Royal Engineers, and he had years of experience in surveying in Palestine and Cyprus. He took an engineer's approach to organisational challenges. The building of structures and the planning of systems, with a mastery of detail, which was at the heart of his organising of armies, was also there in his patient fitting together of the elements for a lasting peace at the end of a conflict.

A soldier's view of war, with its terrible consequences around him, can have at times a greater humanity than that of others further from the front. Richard van Emden's book *Meeting the Enemy: The Human Face of the Great War*, opens with the story of Captain Robert Campbell in a German prisoner-of-war camp in 1916, learning that his mother was dying. The camp commandant offered to arrange to let him go home on a fortnight's leave, if he would promise to return. Captain Campbell gave his promise and was released to spend time with his mother. Then, true to his word, he said goodbye to her and went back to the camp for the rest of the war.

The book includes the account by Private Arthur Wrench of the Seaforth Highlanders of the taking by his division of a village near Beaumont Hamel, and how the walking wounded began to stream by, and among them two men – '...a wounded kilty of the Argylls walking arm-in-arm with a wounded German. As they passed the coffee stall there, one man ran out with a cup of coffee which he handed to the Argyll. He in turn handed it to his stricken companion after which they limped on their way together smiling. Enemies an hour ago, but friends in their common troubles. After all, this war is not a personal affair'.

Richard van Emden interviewed 270 veterans and the stories are sometimes harsh and sometimes heartbreaking; and sometimes deeply moving. He tells for instance of Lieutenant Jack Brewster at Ypres, who mistook a command and rushed forward on his own towards the German trenches and was felled by a shot in the thigh. He started to drag himself back but was trapped in a narrow ditch amidst the fire from both sides, and eventually fell into a deep sleep. He was woken by a German sergeant, and for a time they spoke together, amidst a rain of bullets from both sides passing overhead.

By now, the ground they were on had been taken by the Germans, and Sergeant Wagner bandaged his leg, gave him some bread and wine, and had him taken for treatment. His injury was so severe that he was eventually sent into internment in Switzerland, from where he went back to Britain in 1917. Meanwhile, Sergeant Wagner had written to his parents, to let them know that he had survived.

A year and a half later, the Brewsters had another letter from Sergeant Wagner, to say that his brother had been badly wounded and captured, and was in a military hospital in England. Right away, Lieutenant Brewster went to see him. Sergeant Wagner's brother only had his hospital uniform and winter was on the way, and so the Brewsters provided warm clothing and money.

And there are other stories elsewhere, such as accounts of what happened in the terrible winter war, when the Italian Army invaded Austria-Hungary and both sides were locked in combat on the mountains around a river. They fought in the ice and the snow, hauling guns up steep rock faces and excavating caverns for storage and protection, and the sheer power of the heavy guns would take the top off a hill or bring a cliff down upon the men below. There are several accounts of advances by one side or the other towards positions so heavily defended that attackers were cut down in waves, and eventually the defenders simply stopping shooting.

Mark Thompson recounts in *The White War*: 'On one occasion the Austrian machine gunners were so effective that the second and third waves of Italian infantry could hardly clamber over the corpses of their comrades. An Austrian captain shouted to his gunners, "What do you want, to kill them all? Let them be". The Austrians stopped firing and called out: "Stop, go back! We won't shoot any more. Do you want everyone to die?"'

And somehow that is the language we have to learn today, the language coming from people in the front-line, people who have seen and experienced horrors that haunted them for the rest of their lives. The message they are sending us is about what unites us all, and tells us that what matters is not any form of division between countries and people, but feeling and compassion for fellow-humans wherever they come from. If we could just take this message from them and live it out in our own lives, societies and politics, then maybe we could start to say that their sufferings were not in vain.

Louder Than Any Natural Sound

James Aitchison

2018

*Tornadoes felling deep-rooted oak, ash, beech
and cracking the spines of Poolewe conifers,
the Falls of Glomach swollen in snow-thaw spate,
a thunderstorm echoing a thunderstorm in Glen Coe,
the wolf-pack-howling wind across Rannoch Moor,
the roaring of a force eight westerly
and the crash of deck-high breakers in Uist Bay –
the noise was louder than any natural sound.*

*There's a pathway from the outer ear
and convoluted tubular canals
to the auditory cortex in the brain.*

*Shell blasts ruptured eardrums
and the brain's nerve ends for balancing.
Men staggered and fell down;
they couldn't hear the order to stand to.*

*War changed Craiglockhart, an estate near Edinburgh,
into a convalescent hospital
run as a comfortable country-house hotel
for shell-shocked officers.*

*A common soldier with a broken brain
was shipped to a lunatic asylum
or shot by comrades in a firing squad.*

My weekend on the Western Front

Barbara Millar

2018

Friday 9 November

My connection to the Great War is tenuous – a great uncle I never met fought somewhere in France and survived. He lost an arm in the conflict, however, which meant he could never resume his job as a chemistry teacher. He later killed himself.

But despite not having a family grave to visit or a memorial to scan for the name of a lost loved one, I wanted to be in Flanders for the 100th anniversary of the Armistice on 11 November 1918.

We have come to Ypres, the main locus of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) activities on the Western Front – indeed this area was described as 'the heart and soul of the BEF'. I have been here before, several years ago. It touched me then, and I know that this weekend, while thinking about those young lives lost in such terrible circumstances, I will also be freely weeping for the recent untimely death of my dear friend, Kenneth Roy.

I wasn't able to get independent accommodation in Ypres – it all was booked eons ago, so we have come on a coach excursion with a company specialising in in-depth battlefield tours. Even though our first day is spent travelling from London to Dover and through France to our hotel base near Lille, our guide Greg is keen to make sure we have plenty of background information to prepare us for the days to come.

The 'World War', as it was originally called, became known as the 'Great War'. But just 21 years after the guns fell silent, it was renamed 'World War I'. A falling-out between three cousins ultimately involved 100 countries and states and 19 million fatalities – 11 million on battlefields and a further eight million civilian deaths.

It was the first time that generals had been fighting a war with modernised weaponry, Greg explains. Poisonous gases, chemicals, flame throwers, tanks and aeroplanes were all utilised during the four years of the war. Back in 1914, at the beginning, the tactics used by the generals in charge of operations would have been recognised by Napoleon, fighting 100 years earlier. By 1918, the tactics employed would be recognised by armies today – so much changed during so comparatively short a time.

The British casualties in WWI amounted to some one million men, 2.25% of the country's population. In Italy, the figure was some 3.5% of the population, in France and Germany, closer to 4%. A year after the war ended the Legion, which became the Royal British Legion, began to hold pilgrimages of former soldiers and bereaved families back to the battlefields, not only around the Armistice itself. They also commemorated 8 August 1918, the day when Allied Forces in Amiens, northern France, turned the tide on the German offensive. This was known as 'the big breakthrough'.

Commemorations are also held each year at Victoria Station in London, on 10 November, to mark the return of the body of the Unknown Soldier in 1920. One hundred women were invited to see this soldier's homecoming – their terrible qualification was that they had lost a husband and all their sons in the fighting.

Our hotel, a Holiday Inn, is in the small Lille suburb of Englos. It is fine, nothing luxurious. But then again, no-one is here for a holiday.

Saturday 10 November

A busy schedule is ahead today, much of it in the rain, which was such a feature of the Western Front. We begin at the Messines Ridge where, in 1917, the German Army occupied the heavily fortified high ground, with sweeping views over the flat Flanders countryside. The plan to remove them from this vantage point took the best part of a year to put into effect. A series of tunnels was dug and huge mines were planted. Then they waited for the signal to strike.

At 2.30am, on 7 June 1917, British artillery stopped firing. By 3am, the troops were ready, and at 3.10am, the 19 mines were detonated almost simultaneously. The cacophony was so loud it could be heard in London, Greg tells us. Over 2,000 guns opened fire and 80,000 British troops left their trenches. The German forces were not prepared for anything on this scale and the Ridge, such a strategic point, was taken by British, Australian and New Zealand troops. By 10 June, the Ypres Salient was secured.

The little town of Messines, on the Ridge, is modern and attractive. It has been re-built from the ruins. Like so many towns and villages along the Western Front, it was obliterated – even the roads vanished. All the inhabitants left and even its mayor moved to Lille. Now it is neat and looks prosperous.

At Ploegsteert Wood – given the British nickname 'Plug Street' – the legendary 1914 Christmas truce between the British and German armies took place, but Greg assures us that the story of the game of football they are said to have enjoyed is entirely apocryphal.

The Plug Street Wood cemetery has a memorial for 11,447 men with no known grave. It also has three cemeteries, all beautifully kept by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Each grave is made of white Portland stone and engraved with a cross, Star of David or national emblem and the name, regiment and age, if known, of the soldier who died. Families were allowed to add their own personal inscriptions of up to 66 characters. But so many graves bear no name at all and simply state: 'An unknown soldier of the Great War – known to God'.

After the Allied victory at Messines, the third Ypres campaign – the Passchendaele offensive – began on 31 July 1917. This campaign, we are told, utilised 'creeping barrages' for the first time, a way of moving forward while protecting infantry and artillery. The Battle of Passchendaele, after some successes for the Allies in the early days, got bogged down – literally – in the relentless rains of August 1917. The town was finally taken by the Canadians on 10 November 1917, but this came with huge losses, especially for the British forces.

To another cemetery – there are countless across the countryside – but this is the biggest Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery in the world. Tyne Cot – given its name by the Northumberland Fusiliers who thought the local houses, before they were razed to the ground, reminded them of cottages back home. There are 11,900 graves at Tyne Cot. Three are new – two unknown Australian soldiers and one unknown British soldier – having been recently interred, their bones recovered in excavations on land about to be used for house building. There are a further 35,000 names of the missing engraved on the panels.

It is a sombre place. Yet with a pale autumn sun peeping through dark grey clouds, casting shadows on the pristine graves, there is undoubtedly a terrible beauty to this peaceful resting place.

Sunday 11 November

In Ypres. One hundred years ago today, the Armistice was signed at 5.10am by Supreme Allied Commander Marshal Ferdinand Foch in a railway carriage within the Forest of Compiègne. It was due to come into effect at 11am, by which time word should have got through to front-line troops. Within those six hours, there were a further 863 British and Commonwealth casualties – the last dying at two minutes to 11.

We join the poppy parade of thousands of civilians, marching to the Menin Gate behind police bands, fire and rescue bands, pipe bands and a lively and colourful Sikh band. We are each given a handful of poppy petals to carry as we walk to the most famous Commonwealth war memorial in Flanders. The gate bears the names of 54,896 soldiers who were reported missing in the Ypres Salient between the outbreak of war and 15 August 1917. Because the gate was simply too small to hold all the names of the missing, those who were lost after that date are on the panels at Tyne Cot.

When we arrive at the Gate, we hand our petals back – they will be released from the top of the monument at the end of the commemoration service, swirling wildly in the wind, before covering the ground with pools of deep crimson. The ceremony is most moving, the *Last Post* has never sounded more heart-rending.

As a slightly more upbeat antidote, during our free time that afternoon we take the train to Poperinge, known as 'Pop' to the British forces. This is where two Army chaplains – Philip 'Tubby' Clayton and Neville Talbot – set up Talbot House, named in honour of Neville's brother Gilbert, killed in 1915. Talbot House, or Toc H, as it became known, provided front-line troops with a place of rest and relaxation. There were concert parties, games of chess, newspapers from home – a haven where they could become human again.

At 'Every Man's Club', Tubby Clayton insisted that rank was never observed. I was delighted to discover, on a bed on one of the upper floors, resident black and white cat Benja. I hope he had a long-distant ancestor who could provide those soldiers with the solace and comfort only a cat can offer.

Back in Ypres, there is another, final commemoration service, this one attended by the

King and Queen of Belgium. We watch in the main square, on big screens, no longer having the physical stamina to elbow our way through the crowded streets to the floodlit Menin Gate. How pathetic that sounds, after all we have heard about the fortitude and bravery of those young men sent off to fight in 'the war to end all wars'. If only.

Contributors

James Aitchison is a poet and former academic

Sir James Black was a Nobel Prize-winning physician and pharmacologist. He died aged 85 in 2010

Geoffrey Boulton is a geoscientist and Regius Professor Emeritus of the University of Edinburgh

Angus Peter Campbell is a poet, novelist, journalist, broadcaster and actor. He was born in South Uist and lives in Skye

Bob Cant is a writer and activist

Sir Tom Devine is Professor Emeritus of Scottish history and palaeography at the University of Edinburgh

David Donnison was an academic and social scientist. He died in 2018

Michael Elcock is a writer and former CEO of Tourism Victoria, Canada

Howie Firth is director of Orkney International Science Festival

Russell Galbraith is a writer and former television executive

Ian Hamilton QC is a lawyer. He is known for his involvement in the capture of the Stone of Destiny from Westminster Abbey in 1950

Andrew Hook is an Emeritus Professor of English Literature at the University of Glasgow

Arnold Kemp was a journalist, writer and former newspaper editor. He died in 2002

R D Kernohan is a journalist and writer and former editor of *Life and Work*

Kevin McCarra was football correspondent for *The Guardian* from 2002 to 2012. He died in 2020

J P McCondach returned to teaching following the end of the Second World War

Ian Mackenzie was Head of Religious Broadcasting at BBC Scotland. He died in 2006

Anne-Marie McManus was an occasional writer for the *Scottish Review*

Ronald 'Bingo' Mavor was a critic, arts administrator, lecturer and physician. He died in 2007

Barbara Millar is a funeral celebrant

Robins Millar (1889-1968) was a leading Scottish journalist and playwright

Tom Morton is a writer, broadcaster and funeral celebrant

Mick North is a former academic whose daughter, Sophie, was one of the children killed in the massacre at Dunblane Primary School in 1996

Bill Paterson is a Glasgow-based writer

Alison Prince was an award-winning children's writer, screenwriter and biographer who lived on the island of Arran. She died in 2019

Tessa Ransford (1938 – 2015) was a poet, activist and the founding director of the Scottish Poetry Library

Donald Reid is an Ayrshire-based author

Eileen Reid is a writer

Edna Robertson was a *Glasgow Herald* journalist for 35 years. She died in 2010

George Rosie is a reporter, writer and broadcaster. His documentary *After Lockerbie* won a BAFTA in 1998

Kenneth Roy was a distinguished Scottish journalist and founding editor of the *Scottish Review*. He died in 2018

Anthony Seaton is Emeritus Professor of Environmental and Occupational Medicine at Aberdeen University and Senior Consultant to the Edinburgh Institute of Occupational Medicine

James Shaw Grant (1910 – 1999) was a writer and journalist from the Isle of Lewis. He was editor of the *Stornoway Gazette* from 1932 to 1963

P J B Slater is Emeritus Professor, School of Biology, at the University of St Andrews

Christopher Small was *Glasgow Herald* chief drama critic and literary editor from 1955 until 1980. He died in 2019

Kennedy Wilson is a freelance feature and travel writer