

RAMBLINGS OF A ROLLING STONE

by John (Eddie) Davies



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Press*

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PROLOGUE

This is the story of the first 35 years of my life, from working-class boyhood in pre-war Preston, through active duty in WWII, and then to further adventures working the railways in post-war Africa.

I was born at the most interesting time in the earth's evolution, as for thousands of years the only forms of travel for man were by foot or on horse back. Then, a mere century before I was born, mechanical transport was invented, just 25 years before the first powered flight took to the air in flimsy machines made of canvas and wood. Then the world spun even faster with many new inventions and events such as men landing on the moon, and probes going out into deep space, and medical miracles that were once the preserve of Jesus with help from God his Father. And all of this happening at such a rate, that I may well be around to witness what's coming next.

As for the war years; well, Adolph Hitler was indisputably a monster. He started a world war and was responsible for the deaths of millions, but from my perspective he wasn't all bad! The war released me from poverty into a more equitable society, where I was judged on what I could do, and not who I was. Like Hercules I was given two tasks to perform: The first was to assuage the needs of exotic ladies like Mae West and Mary Pickford, and I applied myself to this task with vim and vigour, notching up quite a good score, including a baroness complete with castle.

The second task was to lead a charge against the enemy, just as my father did in WW1. This I did, not on horseback but enclosed in a tank. In fact, charging the enemy was a daily occurrence hardly worth a mention. As a trooper in a Stuart reconnaissance tank, I led the battle tanks into the attack, charging the enemy positions with the Churchills thundering along behind with every gun blazing.

Would I do it again? I don't think so, for when the war was over I walked away from it all, never attending a re-union or Armistice Day parade, or even wearing a poppy. A team of shire horses couldn't drag me back to repeat it over again.

John Eddie Davies

**Preston, UK.
April 2010**

Cover illustrations

Centre:

- *Posing outside one of my temporary abodes.*

Clockwise from top right:

- *My lovely Italian lover Maria Schillani, whom the exigency of the service caused us to be parted.*
- *This dilapidated wooden shack is the railway station at Lusaka, the capital of Northern Rhodesia. I was obliged to wear the dark regulation uniform in place of khaki, to add a touch of desperately needed class.*
- *North Germany 1945. A much welcome brew on returning to harbour after a patrol where we harassed and skirmished with the rearguard of a retreating but still formidable German army.*
- *With Station Master Murray Thompson and my son Brian at Bwana M'Kubwa, whose white population totalled 10 adults and 5 children.*
- *With 'Spud' Thompson MM at Trieste Harbour in 1946.*
- *The nearest a Guards tank got to Arnhem and still remains as a monument. Just below my foot is the point of entry of an armour piercing round which fatally injured the crew.*
- *Down in the spectacular Luangwa Game Reserve.*

Other illustrations:

- *Images on page 52 are courtesy of www.militaryimages.net.*
- *The image on page 146 'Cuckoo' is courtesy of D. Norman-Roswell from the 6th Guards Tank Brigade website.*
- *Remaining illustrations were kindly supplied by the author, Mr Eddie Davies.*

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Dedicated to my children

Brian & Susan

and my grandchildren

Stuart, Sarah, Jennifer, Amy & John.

With many thanks to my son-in-law, Terry Blacow, for his assistance,
support and endless reserves of patience!

THE MALAISE

When being made redundant towards the end of my working life coincided with medical advice; that if I wished to reap the munificent benefits awaiting to be bestowed by a grateful nation I must give up smoking and drinking. My wife decided to twist the knife and announce that this was an ideal time to give up sex as well. The explanation given was that it would preserve my ailing health, and guarantee a longer, if albeit more miserable future. So, with a huge sigh of relief she abandoned the marital bed forever. But what to do with this sudden excess of spare time? As I had no other hobbies apart from propping up a bar with pint in hand and fag in mouth whilst putting the world to rights, ...plus an occasional joust of sex with my beloved, depending of course, the planets being in favourable alignment for entering the frigid constellation of Diana.

I carried on abusing the remaining two thirds of life's pleasures – the smoking and drinking bit – until I could find a hobby to divert my mind from them. In desperation I took out a library book. It was awful; full of pointless chatter of the Hooray-Henry type. The highlight of humour was when the main character, (after eating an egg sandwich on a train and getting eggshell stuck between his teeth), vomited into the briefcase of an innocent businessman slumbering in the seat opposite, which I thought unfunny and disgusting. Being of the common alehouse type who enjoys a good unsophisticated belly-laugh, I felt I was missing the point of some brand of subtle high-class humour, and returned the book to the library with the thought that the author was either a budding James Joyce, or had influential friends in high places in the publishing world to get that load of rubbish into print. 'I could write a better book myself,' I thought misguidedly, thus triggering off events that would send me down a lonely road from being a sociable, contented man, to a virtual recluse.

Some days later as I wandered around town passing time, I saw an electric typewriter in a stationer's shop window going at a give-away price in a clearance sale. The crap book I'd read immediately sprang to mind, along with the thought that doing a bit of writing might just be the therapy for taking my mind off my problems. So into the shop I popped, and emerged the proud owner of an electric typewriter and a ream of A4 typing paper. My Odyssey had begun.

I had had a bit of experience of typing. This had come about during the war years when the youth of the country were sent to all parts of the globe to broaden their minds. I and sundry others drew a relatively short trip across the Channel, where we spent the best part of a year enjoying the exotic pleasures of the various fun spots in France, the Low Countries and Germany. And as for the inhabitants, the Germans were my favourites, as we were able to walk in and out of their houses as if they were our own.

It was when I dropped in on a German farmhouse to liberate a few eggs that I saw this first typewriter, and the farmer raised no serious objection. So when I left, the typewriter left with me. I think it was because I had a gun, and he hadn't, and that had

prompted the generous side of his nature to reveal itself, as farmers as a rule, no matter what nationality, are not noted for philanthropy. So whenever I had time, I tinkered with the machine until I became fairly proficient at two-finger typing. But of course, that was many years ago, and I would now have to see if I could master this new, modern electric device.

“Whatcha got there?” Inquired my wife, her beak twitching with curiosity in the direction of my purchases.

“A typewriter.” I answered curtly, still annoyed at the termination of marital sex without as much as by your leave. But in truth, we had drifted so far apart over the years that we might as well have lived on separate planets, and when the last tenuous bond – namely sex – was severed, all we had left was a shared roof and a high intolerance of each other.

“What’s it for?” She persisted.

“What do you think it’s for? It’s to write with.”

“Like what?”

“Like a bloody book.” I snapped, out of patience with her, and instantly regretting it for when she digested this, she began to titter like a hyena that’s found a juicy carcass for tea.

“You - write a book? What’s it going to be called for God’s sake - The Boozer’s Guide to Paradise?” Then overcome by her own sparkling wit, began whooping with laughter.

Now, my wife has the laugh of a deranged howler monkey and her hooting brought her bosom-chum Primrose in from next door at the double. Close friends these two, especially after her friend’s husband cleared off; a wise move on his part but it bonded the two women to form a common front against their oppressors, namely mankind which I represented in its lowest form, and doubled the vitriolic tongues with the sort of clever-arsed remarks I was now forced to listen to. On enquiring into the merriment and being apprised of my literary bent, Primrose joined in the mirth. I held my tongue and headed for the stairs wishing I’d kept my trap shut, because in a close-knit village such as this, the news of my proposed enterprise would travel like a bush fire and become the subject of much idle speculation for many under-occupied minds.

An instruction manual came with the typewriter, and I was soon conversant with its operation, although short on dexterity in the QWERTY area. I marvelled at the slight tick the keys made, so refined after the noisy German contraption I once had, and was sure I had the best possible aid to divert my mind from the deadly-but-soothing carcinogenic weed, and the liver-embalming qualities of John Barleycorn. Later, in a more contented frame of mind, I strolled down to my local watering hole for a few farewell pints and a cigar or two, before consigning myself to a literary wilderness.

The next morning I wanted to die. I had massively overdone the farewell to a dissolute life by a long chalk, for, like a bear going into hibernation, I had stuffed myself with ample reserves of nicotine and alcohol to help me weather the winter of denial ahead. I looked in the shaving mirror at the saffron-hued death’s head with hollow eyes staring back at me, and had a vague recollection of my fellow toppers questioning me about a book.

“Book?” I had gasped without comprehension. “Wha-book?”

But now that my grey matter was beginning to function again, I realised my dear wife and Primrose had gone into overdrive in spreading the news of my proposed scribbling to all and sundry. And later, when immersed in the project and my absence from my usual haunts was noted and enquired about, her stock reply was; “He’s up in his bedroom playing with his thingy.” Which painted God knows what kind of pictures in the enquirer’s mind, and which no-doubt were passed on with suitable embellishments born of wild speculations to others. The peculiar looks I got from folk when out on the streets, amply confirmed these suspicions.

To get some air and clear my head, I caught a bus into town to find some literature which would enable me to make a start at writing, as I hadn’t a clue how to begin, and was already regretting the layout of cash on the typewriter. But pride, and fear of further derision from my spouse and her mate prompted me on. After browsing around bookshops, I finally found a booklet purporting to instruct tyros like me in the art of writing.

I returned to the village feeling better than I had on the outward journey, and got off the bus with a feeling of trepidation as I had to pass the hostelry, the Dog & Duck, where I had bid farewell to the Bacchanalian way of life the night before. I approached with caution, as on the other side of the pub was a nest of picnic tables where, on a fine summer’s day such as this, a band of dedicated philosophers would, with the aid of tankards of ale, be addressing their well-oiled brains to the task of putting this seriously disarranged world to rights. As a defecting member of this band of brothers, I knew that should they espy me, they would press me to help them solve this Augean riddle, aided of course with a glass or two of fine ale to promote clarity of thought. With the dehydrated state I was in, the odds on my resisting them were on par with that of a nymphomaniac emerging from a night spent in sex offender’s wing unmolested. But to my surprise, the picnic tables were deserted, except for a gentleman of unbelievable ugliness who greeted me with. “Ow do gaffer - Wot’s dis ‘ere buik o’ yourn about den?”

I halted with a groan, for if this gent knew about what was fast becoming a village joke, then the news of it must have reached both poles and be the subject of much debate in the deepest of jungles by now.

The gentleman, a one Frank Gobbit, aka Frank Einstein, is one of four middle-aged unmarried brothers who still live with their mother on an isolated farm. The brothers are so alike that it is hard to tell them apart, except for Frank. Whereas his siblings display a selection of uneven teeth of hues found in snooker set, black, brown and green, Frank has only two large yellow canines that curve up on each side of his lower jaw like tusks. Indeed, his thick muscular body and misshapen head give the impression of a very large warthog having been stuffed inside the skin of a man. God knows how many generations of inbreeding it took to produce this result, but it is a commonly held view that it was just as well there had been no sisters in the present brood, or the next generation might have had no option but to take up pond-life again. Their neglected poultry have already preceded them in that direction by roosting in the tree tops, and, by failing to grasp the concept of high-rise nest building so crucial to their survival, are ensuring their offspring’s extinction through career-blighting plunges to the ground.

But whereas his brothers hardly ever leave the farm, Frank is a gentle gregarious creature who puts himself around the village where people gather, and his idea of a conversation is to burble inanities that end in uproarious laughter that is startling to those not used to it. His tusked mouth gapes wetly like a happy hippo surfacing for air,

and the ear-splitting bray which issues is as that of a tortured mule. Which soon leads to an exodus leaving Frank braying to the breeze. But I have a soft spot for Frank, and told him the book was about village idiots.

“Am ah in yer buik?” He wished to know.

“You’re the main man.” I assured him. “Along with my wife and her mate plus a few more raving bone-heads I’ve met along the way.”

This pleased Frank no end, who brayed and brayed that he was going to be famous at last and might appear on the Telly. And I went on my way puzzling over why the idea of proposing to write a book provokes such huge amounts of unrestrained hilarity amongst certain types of people, which I found most peculiar.

I sat at the small table under my bedroom window, looking at the typewriter in desperation. I’d got writer’s block before I’d even typed a single letter. The booklet I’d bought advised me, ‘to have a thorough and detailed knowledge of my subject’ which stumped me, as I seemed to have gone through life without garnering a scant – let alone a detailed knowledge – of a single subject worth writing about. Then it dawned on me that the only thing I knew enough about - to write about - was me. That was it then, put all my moans and groans of a misspent life down on paper as a panacea to soothe the agues afflicting an abused and ailing body, and whether they got read or not was of no interest to me. I was now ready to begin my epic opus simply entitled: “The Ramblings of a Rolling Stone.”



- *My father, Gunner J. Davies in 1910. He served in the 3rd Afgan-Boer campaign, as well as the Great War 1914-18.*
- *Dad in 1942 with Nelson, the one-eyed dog.*

CHAPTER 2

GENESIS; AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING

I was born in a dingy bedroom at number 64 Nelson Street, Preston, Lancashire on the 9th of March 1925. This street, along with others like it, was demolished long ago, and in its stead now stands the sprawling campus of the University of Central Lancashire. Not built I hasten to add, to mark the spot where an unremarkable son of the parish first saw light.

The area is known as the Adelphi, and whoever chose that name had a wry sense of humour as there may have been nymphs and shepherds coming merrily away after closing time in dark, dank alleyways between backyards, but apart from that, there was a notable lack of Delphic oracles thereabouts.

In those days the area was a huddled mass of tiny back-to-back terraced houses which housed cotton operatives adjacent to the mills, and it was all ‘eeh bah gum’, Gracie Fields and tripe trotters for tea. A stranger entering a street would send net curtains twitching a Mexican wave of warning, and housewives of all ages would appear on doorsteps with arms folded and lips forming silent words of enquiry to each other. They were, in the local jargon, ‘mee mowing’, a form of lip-reading born in the deafening roar of the weaving sheds. If the stranger appeared uncertain of his destination, the matriarch of the street would accost him to ascertain his business. If he were genuine, he would be escorted to the house he was seeking and introduced with a simpering, “Here’s your cousin Egbert from Chorley,” (A mythical place people had heard of but didn’t believe existed; something like Camelot.) “He was lost but we put him right.” Then news of cousin Egbert’s presence would spread far and wide like ripples on a pond. But if the stranger had no business locally, he would be glared out of the street. This close watch on strangers was one of the reasons why there was never a burglary within living memory in the street. But the chief reason was no one had anything worth stealing.

To introduce myself and present a sketch of my antecedents. My name is John Edward Davies, son of John Davies, navigator by trade; and his wife Elizabeth, self employed washerwoman, soothsayer, part time medium, impromptu midwife and layer-out of the dead. A multi-talented woman whose services were much in demand by the local people

I will deal with my father first. He was born in Cherry Lane in the Walton district of Liverpool of a Welsh sire and an Irish mother, which placed him firmly in the substrata of Liverpudlian society as ‘Liverpool-Irish’, a species of *untermench* regarded as an untouchable on one side of the Irish Sea and a Scouse Louse on the other. And vastly inferior to the other mongrel breed – the Irish American – by virtue of the almighty dollar. Both my father’s parents and my maternal grandmother had departed this life before I made my squalling entry into it, so my family history only goes back in memory as far as my maternal grandfather, who lodged with us.

The title of my father’s profession is highly misleading, as he didn’t know the

difference between a sexton and a sextant, but the truncated form of ‘navvy’ describes his trade succinctly. He was a hard-working man who left the house early morning carrying the tools of his trade on his shoulder; a spade, shovel and pick. He would return late evening, dog tired after a back-breaking day of digging out footings and drainage channels, and after a meal that usually consisted of stew and dumplings, would sit on a hard straight-backed chair at the plain deal kitchen table in the tiny front room, reading a book until bedtime. He was a great reader but no conversationalist; he rarely said a word to anyone.

Bad weather was his Nemesis, and ours. Should rain, snow or frost occur, he would be laid off without pay, and the same when he got his one-week unpaid holiday each year. These were known as broken weeks and were dreaded, and what money there was went on food, and the rent man had to wait, as did every other creditor. But they were accustomed to the effect the British climate had on my father’s trade, and when the monsoons or the jolly holidays ended, mother would diligently pay off accumulated debts at so much a week. Of course there was no social security or child allowances in those days, as the State didn’t believe in rewarding the hoi polloi of society with cash incentives and housing benefits for unbridled fornication. A bed in a Home for Unmarried Mothers dominated by religious harpies was all that was on offer to a fallen woman.

But back to my father; a taciturn man who, in the Victorian tradition held himself aloof from his children. He took the view that having fathered, fed and housed them until they reached earning age, that he had done his duty and no more was expected of him. I don’t recall him speaking to me on any subject at all during my formative years, and the only time I got his attention was if I got a little boisterous indoors, then he would look up from his book and fix me with piercing slate-grey eyes. He never said a word, he didn’t have to, those eyes said it all, and I would be off out of the door like a supersonic streak, gone for the day out of his way.

What I knew about him was whatever I gleaned from conversations my mother had with others regarding him, to which I was privy. Or, if my father was chatting with someone within my hearing – which I found most disturbing – as both of them, along with my siblings, tended to ignore my presence as if I was some wraithlike object without sensory perceptions.

From these eavesdroppings, I learned he had joined the Royal Field Artillery sometime after the turn of the century to become a Rough Rider, these being the horsemen who control a team of horses pulling an 18-pounder cannon. He was sent first to the Northwest Frontier where no doubt he saw some action, but when the first war broke out, he was shipped back to serve on the Western Front. I was impressed to learn this, as during his lifetime he never said a single word to me about it. But I was fortunate enough in my mid teens to hear him relate an experience of his wartime days to another chap who apparently, had served in the same sector as he in Flanders.

It was in a pub, and although he liked a drink he was no alcoholic, mother saw to that. A Saturday night and a Sunday noontime session with his peers sufficed for him to exercise vocal cords which had lain dusty and dormant all week. He didn’t notice my entry, and the last thing I would ever do would be to join his company uninvited. I stood at the bar where a flimsy partition separated me from father and his companion and could hear every word that passed between them. He was telling his colleague of the time he was subjected to a bombardment of gas and high-explosive shells in which he

was gassed, but still mobile, and was ordered to help a comrade wounded in a leg back to a field dressing station. So off they staggered to the rear, supporting each other until they reached Hellfire Corner where they realised, given the shape they were in, that this was as far as they were going to get.

‘Hellfire Corner’ as its name implied, was a hellish place on the supply-route to the front, under constant fire from German guns. Now and again the shelling would ease off, and there would be a mad dash by British troops and supply wagons in both directions to pass this spot before it resumed. This constant shelling had turned the place into a wasteland of shell holes and smashed supply wagons, and was strewn thick with corpses of animals and men that hadn’t made it through.

They took cover in a shell hole and glumly surveyed the curtain of exploding earth barring their way, and even if a lull came in the shelling, their painful progress would ensure they would never get clear before the next stonk arrived. To ease some of the pain in his wounded leg, my father’s comrade lit a woodbine on which father gazed with naked envy, as the mucus seeping from his lips, from suppurating lungs precluded him from indulging in this soothing rite. Then a miracle happened. A mule appeared on the lip of their shell hole, wild eyed and terrified, the survivor of some luckless wagon team and it still had a halter on with a length of rein trailing from it. My father lunged for the rein and secure the animal, mounted it and somehow pulled his mate up behind him. That they had no saddle was of little importance as they were roughriders, trained to jump hurdles without stirrups and with hands clasped behind backs. Jiggling about on the back of the agitated mule and in sight of German observers, they anxiously waited for a pause in the shelling.

The break came. Father kicked the mule in the ribs to set sail for safety, and the mule responded by whipping around and galloping back in the direction they had come. Vital seconds were lost getting the mule pointing the right way and as the mule finally headed for Hellfire Corner, the first shells of another barrage came howling over. Coming the other way down the avenue of shattered trees at full stretch were three GS wagons, the drivers standing out of their seats as they flayed their teams for more speed to clear the area before the shells arrived.

“TOO LATE - TURN BACK!” Screamed the lead wagon driver as they crashed by in a welter of flying hooves. Father tried to turn but the mule wouldn’t respond, instead laying back its ears and heading straight for the curtain of slow-rising earth.

“I just shut my eyes and prayed.” Related father sadly. “Nott’n else I could do y’see.” And into the inferno they galloped with blasts from explosions blowing them this way and that and pelting them with clods of earth, which father first thought was shrapnel. Then they were out of it with the mule still going at full gallop until it pitched forward, throwing both riders. Either, according to father, its heart gave out or shrapnel got it. In any event, they didn’t hang about to find out. Helping each other the best they could, they reached a place of safety where they finally got a lift to a field hospital.

Behind the partition I was all-agog. I couldn’t believe this quiet man, my father, could be involved in such an adventure. How many more thrilling tales could he tell if he chose? What he had done in my estimation was comparable to the Charge of the Light Brigade, albeit with a cast of a mule and two disabled men. And when I went to war—which I was in no doubt I would, as my readings had shown that England had provided most generations with a conflict in which they were allowed to participate—that I would emulate my father’s feat and perform a death-defying ride with guns to the

left of me and guns to the right. Something which later I was actually to do, but with the utmost reluctance.

But oddly, this perilous ride through Hellfire Corner was not the main subject of the story, but a mere detail leading up to it. The main issue which he described in loving detail, was the daily bottle of Guinness he was prescribed to aid him overcome the effects of gas. His tone was of pure wonder and gratitude that someone in authority should deem him worthy of such special consideration. No one else in the ward got one, not even his mate who had to have his leg amputated as the result of his wounds, and he gave me the impression that being gassed and running the gauntlet of Hellfire Corner, had been well worth while in view of such a rich reward. Still, he hadn't had much given to him during his lifetime. So I suppose that is why the memory of that daily bottle of Guinness stayed with him all his life as the only incident worth relating. But many years later, the effects of that gassing aided by a regular intake of Capstan Full Strength, finally did for him.

My mother, on the other hand, was a different kettle of fish. A different brush stroke altogether. As different from my father as chalk is from cheese. In fact, there aren't words of sufficient power to describe just how different she was.

She must have been an attractive woman in her younger days for even in old age despite a lifetime of drudgery and childbearing, her features retained more than a hint of that former wild-rose beauty. But her nature, Yumping Yimminy! It was volcanic. It was as if *she* had the fiery Celtic blood coursing through her veins, and not my father. She was of pure Lancashire stock, a Higham. "I am one of the mighty Higham's I am.." my grandfather was fond of quoting, and I don't know why he was so proud of the name as no wealth or property was attached to it. If, on the other hand, had he been a de Hoghton, well then, I would have been seriously impressed, as I would have looked forward with keen interest to inheriting a magnificent castle and a large dollop of cash. But a Higham!!! All they seemed to have inherited was poverty and hard times.

Early in her marriage, mother was employed as a laundress at the Preston Steam Laundry. However, during a heated discussion with an overseer regarding rates of pay, mother's fist, in trying to press a telling point home, somehow glanced off the overseer's jaw. Mother reckoned he did a dive but those who witnessed the incident said he dropped as if pole-axed, and it took ten minutes to bring him around again.

She was of course sacked, and there being no other laundry in town promptly set up a laundry business in our back kitchen; her clients being business people who lived on the outskirts of town. And the extra income was crucial in keeping our heads above water especially in bad times, but she relinquished this function when we moved away from the district.

Our house, as I remember it, seemed to be some sort of an intelligence-gathering centre where gossip, rumours, and even hard facts were brought to be analysed and assessed by mother, as her strong personality attracted those of lesser character to her. A session would begin with the female voice of a messenger bearing news, coyly cooing through the ever-open front door, "Are you there Lizzie?" This put the washing on hold whilst the rest of the coven mysteriously alerted, would gather to hold court. When pint pots of tea had been brewed, mother's snuff box would come out and offered around, and after much snorting and sneezing into snuff and snot-stained rags that served as hankies, the nuggets of scandal or whatever would be presented and the outcomes predicted by mother, to be confirmed by the reading of tea leaves left in the bottom of a chosen one's pint pot.

Mother, as previously stated, responded to all emergency calls ranging from premature confinements to laying-out the dead, and neatly bridged the gap between the living and dead by dabbling in spiritualism, which allowed her to keep in touch with clients currently residing in the Hereafter. And I had the unsettling experience of discovering what the mysterious 'laying-out' process was, when, in a fit of post-natal depression Franny Beetham's mother (Franny was my little playmate from next door) threw herself off the Fylde road canal bridge, with infant daughter in her arms. The same infant who, only a few weeks before had been delivered by mother. So naturally, it fell to her the task of laying them out in preparation for interment.

The day before the funeral as I came out of my house, Franny called to me from his doorstep where he usually sat, a dirty-faced tear-streaked five year old, the same age as me. "Wanna see mi mam?" He asked. I nodded, having nothing better to do and no idea of what I was to see, and into his house we went.

Franny's household, incredibly, was more poverty stricken than ours, an achievement worth a mention. The only furniture in the dim, shabby room was an old kitchen table with an open coffin resting on it, and a rickety chair. I climbed on the chair and looked down at two waxy faces in repose, the baby lying at the mother's breast. I expected his mother to rouse and tell me off for standing on the chair and gawking down at her. When she didn't move or open her eyes, I felt strangely perturbed by their stillness. "Your mam laid my mam out." Franny informed me. "She weshed her *all over*, bum an' all."

"*All over?*" I echoed, aghast at such a thing, as bums were mucky things which should be kept in a reasonable state of cleanliness by their owners without outside help, especially my mother's.

Franny nodded. "An' the babby's, I wetched her."

"Why?" I wished to know.

"Cos God won't let you inta 'eaven if you're dirty." Said Franny, knowledgeably.

"That fussy eh?"

"Yeh!"

"Think he'd let *us* in?"

"Me mebbe - don't know about you though." Said Franny doubtfully; eyeing my face that almost matched his for grubbiness.

With my eligibility of becoming a cherub disposed of, I went home to ponder on what I had seen, and there was mother kneading a batch of dough. It was Friday, baking day. I watched with troubled eyes those strong hands at work, wondering what they had been doing to Franny's mother. But when the mouth watering aroma of barm cakes and dinner-plate-sized Chorley cakes began to invade my nostrils, which later I would be cramming in my mouth still warm and dripping with melting butter, t'was enough to banish all thoughts of mother's hands and their dubious activities out of my mind.

But mother's interest in the spirit world gave me cause for concern, as a five-year-old's imagination can summon up plenty of its own brand of hobgoblins to frighten itself with, without having to cope with an assortment of spectres invited into the house by a supposedly responsible parent. Especially in a house with just a single gas mantle jutting from a chimney breast and the rest of the house lit by guttering candles, which creates a perfect atmosphere for spooks to haunt with maximum effect on the haunted.

There was, and still is, a Spiritualist church a short distance away from Nelson street at the bottom of Moor Lane, where mother and her amigos could have gone and

hobnobbed with the dead to their heart's content. But no, she preferred them to make house calls. Sometimes I'd attend a séance, standing well out of the way preferably near an open door, and watch with increasing bewilderment as mother and her mates addressed questions to empty space, and seemingly getting answers back that were audible to them but not to me. And mystified how they could see ghosts plain enough to chat with, yet remain totally oblivious of me.

So it came as no great surprise when shortly after being laid to rest by courtesy of the parish, that Franny's mother popped in to apprise mother of the current goings on in the Hereafter, and this before quite a sizable audience of neighbours too. According to mother's interpretation of this event, Grace (Franny's mother), had come home to find her husband had sold the children's beds, including the baby's cot for beer money, leaving her deeply distraught as to where the children would lay their weary heads that night. Then her thoughts had turned to the canal where she would find the long sleep that would solve all her problems. The furious hiss of outrage from the coven at this disclosure should have incinerated Franny's father on the spot, wherever he might be drinking. But he went to the top of mother's hit list, literally.

Not long after, he left town with more than a bruised ego to nurse, compliments of mother's right hook, and Franny and his siblings disappeared from my life into an orphanage. Which I think must have been an improvement on the life he led when his father was around.

Another member of the spirit world I was to hear a lot about was Uncle Edward, my mother's brother who had been killed in the first war whilst serving with the Loyal North Lancs. Mother often regaled her cronies with the story of how at the end of his last leave he had paused at the door, then turned to her hollow-eyed and sad, saying he wouldn't be back any more except maybe in spirit. And according to mother he came to her soon after in the night to say he was safe, and not frightened any more.

"We got the telegram a few days later saying he'd been killed in action." Mother said mournfully. "But he still comes to see me every now and then, wanting to be remembered you see. So when buggerlugs over there was born, I named him after Eddie, which is turning out to be a waste of a good name." She rolled a disaffected eye in my direction; the coterie followed her gaze with features that dutifully slumped to register disappointment at what they saw. Alarmed that my cloak of invisibility had suddenly slipped, I fled the scene. But I always regarded Uncle Eddie as a benign spirit with whom I may have had a lot in common and kept a sharp eye open for him, but he was to remain forever, discreetly in the shadows.

Many years later, I requested details of his death and burial site from the LNL records office at Fulwood Barracks with the object of visiting it. As no other member of my family before me could have afforded the trip, and as his namesake, I thought I owed it to him. The reply I got was certainly eye popping. According to the letter, he'd been engaged in the later battles of Ypres, The Somme, Guillemont, Ginchy, Flers Corcelette, Pilckem, Menin Road, Cambria and Estaires. No wonder the poor devil thought his time was up. To continue surviving man-eating battles of such magnitude was expecting too much from the fates. And the irony of it was, he was killed in the last great German offensive of the war.

"Killed in action Flanders 09.04.1918. (Givenchy) Aged 21. No known grave."

Said the letter of reply. So I saw no point in travelling to France to look at a name chiselled on a wall when it was conveniently inscribed on the stairway in the Harris Museum. So Uncle Edward remains like the many hundreds of thousands of others who

disappeared without trace under the sacred mud of France, a pointlessly-sacrificed victim of an unnecessary war.



- *Granddad Higham, a great sage and philosopher, with his great-grandson Roy.*

GRANDDAD AND THE WORK ETHIC

My early childhood, thanks to Granddad, was one of high adventure enriched with sage tips on how to survive life's jungle. I had an older brother and sister, Arthur and Florrie who were ten and five years my senior, and a younger sister and brother, Kathleen and Ronnie who were three and five years younger. The reason for these wide gaps in ages I learned was that five other children had been born in the intervening years, but had not survived the high infant mortality rate of that era. This led to a polarization at each end of the scale with me crashing about like a loose cannon in between, without really relating to either pair.

In fact we were so insulated from each other, that I was 27 before I learned that Arthur's surname was Higham and was my half brother, which explained why I was named after Uncle Edward and not he. But I would have liked to have known who his father was as he must have been a silver tongued operator to have seduced mother and escaped the consequences. But he bequeathed Arthur with a high level of intelligence that was to stand him in good stead. I used to joke he'd been given my share of brains as well. But his early life was hard, as at 14 he was committed to serfdom as a spinner in Shelley Road Cotton Mill, until the war came and with it liberation in the form of his calling-up papers for the army, never to see the inside of a cotton mill again. And I certainly hand it to my father as he never once by word or deed, indicate that Arthur was not his natural son.

Florrie, of the sandy hair and freckles was a chip off the old block, ready to take umbrage with *anyone* who dare murmur "Ginger nut" within her hearing. She took a brief interest in me when I was about three by dragging my protesting body around selected Mission Halls and Sunday Schools, but it wasn't in search of piety, it was to collect gold stars for attendance for which a full card would entitle her to a fun-filled day trip to the seaside, or a Christmas party, dependant on the time of the year. Florrie had obtained a card for me to fill with gold stars with the view of reaping double rewards when presenting them. But the church authorities didn't view this arrangement in the same light as she, and I certainly never saw the seaside or a Christmas party. But what I did see was the insides of many places of worship and was conversant with hymns and responses over a wide range of secular callings, and thankful there were no Buddhist shrines or Muslim mosques or Hindu temples around in those days, or Florrie would have had me down on my knees wailing praises to whatever deity was ruling the roost in those particular tabernacles, in her quest for an away day to Mecca.

But if my memory serves me right, her religious zeal was doused after a trip to the seaside where an ebb-tide took the sea far out of sight over the distant horizon, and a howling gale rendered the eatables uneatable by sabotaging them with sand. This was followed by a controversial Christmas party in which she only got one lot of food instead the two her pair of cards *must surely* have entitled her to, and one lousy prezzy from a curt Santa who wouldn't *even listen* to her side of the argument. It was a doll of

such shoddy manufacture that its legs fell off on the way home. She left the legless torso spiked on the railings outside of St. Peter's Church as a gesture of her return to paganism. Christianity, she let it be known, wasn't worth the effort required to practice it.

My younger sister and brother, Kathleen and Ronnie, were of such a young age that they didn't impinge on my consciousness at all in the early years. And did their growing up after I had left home which leaves the eighth member of our household to account for, dear old Granddad.

Granddad had a lifelong fascination with work and could hold forth endlessly on all its aspects, but would disappear at the speed of light at the mere mention of him doing any.

"Edward!" He would lecture me. "There's one thing this world will never run short of and that's hard work. But the trouble is, nobody wants to pay you for doing it." A truism I later found to be absolutely correct.

He, like Arthur after him, had worked in the consumptive atmosphere of the cotton mills as a spinner until 40, then, deciding he had done his whack for mankind, had arbitrarily retired. How he supported a family without toil in an age bereft of State handouts was and still is, a mystery. But he did relate to me that being a well-built man who suited a uniform, he could earn a few shillings making up the number in a marching band of which there were many around in those days. He couldn't play a note, but marched along with the rest, huffing and puffing pretending to play a cornet or flute, but distinctly put out if lumbered with a tuba or bass sax, as the pay was the same no matter what size or weight of instrument.

He took charge of me when I was about four, as Kathleen would be toddling by then and claiming more of mother's attention. And being a rumbustious child I must have stretched her nerves to the limit, as my favourite play-area was the stairs which ran up from the steam-filled kitchen with its suspended, never-empty drying rack—where mother vigorously pounded washing in a dolly-tub with a posser—to two small bedrooms and a landing which ran the length of the house. This, in my overly-fertile imagination was 'my castle' to be defended to the death.

Every day, ignoring mother's perspiring face scowling at me through a tangle of damp locks, I would shout defiance at imaginary enemies from the bottom step and they would attack, forcing me step by step with much vocalising back up the stairs. But once on the landing, I would be endowed with the agility and swordsmanship of Douglas Fairbanks and slaughter my foes, whose bodies I flung with jubilant cries over the banisters which served as ramps. The "bodies" were dummies, made out of items of apparel plundered from bundles of soiled washing on the landing awaiting mother's attention, and when they bounced into the kitchen, her exasperated cry of, "WHATCHA DOIN' WI' DOCTOR BRADLEY'S LONG JOHNS AN' HIS WIFE'S SHIFT?" ..could be heard three streets away. I suppose she could tell at a glance whose apparel was whose through the repetitive cycle of washing them.

Being entrusted to Granddad for safe keeping was a quantum leap for me, as apart from entering a new and exciting world, I was able to tap into his vast fount of knowledge which was to stand me in good stead in later years.

"Depend on no one but yourself." He lectured me.

"Expect nothing, and you'll never be disappointed."

“Your best friend is the silver in your pocket.”

“There is no taste in nothing.”

“There is nothing for the dumb.”

“If you’re done a bad turn, remember, there’s always a day called catchem.”

“Be a listener and not a spouter, and you’ll learn new things every day.”

He had a homily to cover every eventuality, did Granddad.

Every mid-morning when the streets were thoroughly aired, he would take me down to the canal where a fresh adventure would unfold. Whilst strolling the towpath he would tell me cautionary tales of improbable beings such as Ginny Greenteeth, a witch who lurks in the waterside reeds who grabs unaccompanied small boys that venture too close to the water, drowns, then eats them. This tale served no useful purpose to deter me from the water’s edge, for a year later when alone and cavorting on the canal bank, I fell in and would have drowned if a sharp-eyed bargee hadn’t spotted me drifting by and pulled me out. I still remember those green opaque depths and having no sense of drowning. But I don’t think the feeling of lassitude would have prevailed if I had observed Ginny Greenteeth coming the other way. I would have shot out of that canal like a cruise missile.

Another shady character I had to look out for was Springheel Jack. A tall gent dressed in top hat, tails and shod in spring loaded boots, who hopped about after dark in search of urchins who should be home abed. He could soar with ease over backyard walls and roofs in pursuit of miscreants. What he did with them should he catch any was never revealed.

He then dreamt up a couple of beauties that caused me much concern. The first was Banister Doll, an apparition who haunted stairways with much moaning and groaning and clanking of chains. Should I encounter her on our stairs, Granddad warned, I must not look into her tormented eyes or she’d suck the very soul from my body through my eye sockets, including my eyeballs. To avoid this, I must avert my gaze and squeeze past her.

SQUEEZE PAST THAT!!! He had to be kidding!

The other star turn was the improbable Tommy Ticklebum, a troll who lurked in toilet bowls and watched for youths or maidens who tarried too long in the loo with affairs other than the call of nature. And should he spot any, he would hurry them along by vigorously pinching their posteriors with his dirty long sharp fingernails.

This was bad news for me, as I regarded the stairs and outside water closet in the yard as safe areas where I was unlikely to encounter any of mother’s spectral friends. My reasoning for this was that ghosts don’t climb stairs, but simply levitate through ceilings should they wish to ascend. And they were certainly above haunting toilets, as the Epsom salts industry would collapse if they did. But thanks to Granddad, I now had a howling horror on the stairs and a perverted poltergeist in the bog to worry about

After toddling along the towpath for couple of miles, with Granddad’s stories interrupted as he exchanged pleasantries with occupants of passing barges, he would organise a ride back for me on the broad back of a tow horse. I felt like a king up there, sneering down at the reeds and daring Ginny Greenteeth to come and get me. When we got back to Fylde road, he would lift me off the horse, courteously thank the bargee, and we would head for town, as there was work to be done, or what passed for work in Granddad’s eyes. He, unknown to mother, was a bookie’s runner, an illegal means of earning a living in those prim days, and I was his decoy.

He collected bets for a bookie by the name of Felix who operated from the hayloft in the stables at the back of the Adelphi Hotel. On the way there we would stop at a small sweet shop where he would buy me a penn'orth of homemade treacle toffee. The toffee was still in the trays. It was already made, but broken-up in all shapes and sizes, and I would stuff the biggest piece I could find into my mouth, and invariably get it wedged across my jaws. Granddad would regard my distended cheeks and bulging eyes and mildly observe in his broad dialect.

"Thou art banna chooack thys'el t'deeath wi' yon lot stook in thy gob."

Then leave me to frantically suck my way to safety, whilst he carried on with his daily purchase of a half-ounce of black twist, two cheroots and a penny clay pipe.

He spoke with the tongue of an Old Testament Prophet did Granddad, all thee's and thou's and wilt's and waint's. A mode of speech I slavishly copied until entering the army, and got on the wrong side of a dreaded Drill Sergeant who couldn't understand a word I was saying, who finally screamed.

"D'YE NO KEN ONNEY O' THE ENGLISH LANGWITCH AT A' - YE TOTTY HEIDED EEJIT?"

The cheeky sod! That great exponent of the English language, Shakespeare himself, would have understood me perfectly and have applauded the rich resonance of my medieval speech, which was more than could be said for the drill pig's gibberish. However, I modified my speech to blend with the accents of those around me, and even introduced a slight Scottish burr to help it along in communicating with my superiors.

Outside the Adelphi Hotel we split up, Granddad taking up station facing Friargate, whilst I crossed the road to loiter outside the Trustee Savings Bank. But business could not begin until the law had been appeased. Soon, a couple of tall policemen appeared and after a few words were exchanged, Granddad slipped each a cheroot which on Saturdays, the main racing day, would be handsomely gift wrapped in a crisp pound note,

When I queried these gifts—as at first I thought the cheroots were liquorice sticks which, by virtue of direct descent plus continuous bloodline and close family ties, should rightfully be mine—he, like the wise old bird he was, just winked and said.

"Cast a little bread on the water, and it will return to you four-fold."

Personally, I couldn't see how casting a perfectly good slice of bread into a duck pond and getting four slices of soggy duck food back was of any benefit to anyone, but if my Granddad said it was, well then, it was.

When the Bobbies had gone, the punters emerged from alleys and other hidey-holes to place bets. These were mainly silver coins wrapped in twists of paper on which were scrawled hopeful doubles, doubtful trebles and impossibly optimistic accumulators. After taking so many, he'd beckon me over and stuff them in my jacket pockets with the hissed instruction of. "Tek 'em t' Felix."

And off I'd trot past the lookout posted at the yard entrance and into the stables, then up wooden steps to a hayloft long-devoid of hay, where behind a trestle table sat Felix like a malignant toad, with Wilko, his tubercular clerk whose pallid features and crumpled suit of a fusty hue suggested recent resurrection. Behind them lounged a rough bunch of hangers-on in blue serge suits with caps aslant, the bruisers sporting red polka dotted neckerchiefs, the dandies white silk scarves tucked neatly into waistcoat tops. And set in the wall behind them a stout wooden door, the escape route to the hotel

should there be a raid.

Whenever I appeared, Wilko would leap out of his chair and run around the table to empty my pockets. He smelled as rancid as he looked. The cash going into a large leather satchel that Felix kept a tight grip on, the bets speared on a portable spike for easy transport or disposal. Relieved of my load, Wilko would wave a dismissive hand and back I would trot, wondering if Granddad would augment my dwindling stock of treacle toffee with another pennyworth. These were salad days that I thought would never end. Alas they did, and with a bang.

It was like any other day in the betting business when out of a clear blue sky, calamity struck. Granddad had just put bets in my pockets to take to Felix, when around the corner came the two policemen and a sergeant at the double. The lookout on the stable yard entrance vanished with the practised ease of a Genie.

"Sorry Jem." One of the Bobbies murmured to my shocked Granddad. "Didn't know the Sarge was going to pull this one."

A quick search revealed that although Granddad was clean I was loaded, and therefore as guilty as hell. But Granddad coughed to handling the bets and off we were marched to Earl Street nick, which set onlookers to loudly speculate on the nature of our crimes. On arriving at the station, I was sat on a wooden bench in a gloomy corridor facing a row of cells, whilst Granddad was being booked in the charge room next door. When he finally joined me, he assured me all was well and we'd soon be going home.

"When?" I wished to know.

"When your mother gets here." He replied dejectedly. "That bloody sergeant's sent for her."

A heavy gloom fell, as the paramount and most unforgivable crime in mother's book was "*showing her up!*" And anyone guilty of inflicting this heinous crime on her and not immediately emigrating, was in real danger of being hung, drawn and quartered, stapled together again, and a repeat performance staged later for those who'd missed it first time round. And here we were, showing her up. *BIG TIME!*

Whilst Granddad chewed nervously on a ragged end of his moustache, I scoured my pockets with hopeful fingers for stray slivers of treacle toffee that might have got lodged there, a hopeless quest. Then like a clarion call summoning the damned to purgatory, a familiar voice rang out demanding; "*WHERE THE HELL ARE THEY THEN???*"

Which prompted me to ask. "Is there really a heaven Granddad?"

"I bloody hope so." He sighed. "There's got to be some place better than this somewhere."

We were taken to the charge room where mother stood simmering with barely-contained rage. She hadn't been given time to change out of her washer-woman rags, or even throw a shawl over a torn, sweat-stained camisole which strained at her broad shoulders and ample breasts. Her tawny hair hung damp and bedraggled, and a make-shift pinafore proclaiming its previous function did not enhance the tatty old brown skirt she wore for work.

"KERR'S PINKS POTATOES." It said.

Bare legs and feet shod in despised clogs, the hallmark of the lowest-of-low in a class-ridden society completed her ensemble. We both simpered at her in a forlorn

attempt to elicit a little sympathy and understanding for our mutual predicament, but the venomous look we got in return told us to forget it, we were as good as dead.

She smouldered as the sergeant lectured on her apparent neglect of maternal and filial responsibilities, and when he got to the bit that Granddad and I were desperately waiting for, which was, "You can go now." The scene was transformed from a tableau of frozen fear to one of frenzied activity, as she dived to head us off in our scuttle for the door.

We burst out to the street and into the crowded market place with mother right behind us. If it had not been a market day she would have caught us, as being made of Olympic material, not only could she punch like Jack Dempsey, but also had a turn of speed comparable to that of Jesse Owens. However, people getting in her way hampered her efforts to grab hold of us.

She abandoned the chase to preserve some shreds of dignity and we lost sight of her, so we paused for a breather at the junction of Fylde road and Brook Street. Then she came marching into view with the implacable stride of a storm trooper, her iron-shod clogs resounding off the pavement like rifle shots and sturdy legs propelling that awesome Bodecean body along as if powered by pistons. Granddad eyed her thoughtfully, and came to a judicious decision.

"Thee tek thyself off 'ooam lad." He instructed me. "Ahm banna lodge in Manny rooad fer t'neet." "Can I come as well?" I begged, knowing the impossibility of such a request. He shook his head and noting the safety margin between mother and he diminishing at an alarming rate, took off with an awkward flat-footed canter that covered the ground at a fair rate of speed. It must be in the genes passed down in our family from pre-historic days, this instinct of the male to automatically flee from an advancing predatory female.

The bolthole he was making for was Manchester road, the grottiest most turbulent area in Preston. And it hasn't changed much since, apart from the crummy lodging houses being torn down, except for Arkwright House, the worst of the lot that housed the dross of casual labour, being in the main, itinerant Irishmen driven to seek work in England. The social centre of this cesspit was the Balmoral Hotel and invariably at closing time, the taunting strains of, "And the boys who beat the Black and Tans were the boys from County Cork." Signalled the start of hostilities in which the police joyously joined in. So it was a sign of real desperation for Granddad to be seeking sanctuary in such a troubled spot as this.

I ran home to take refuge in my own "hole in the wall," which owing to a proliferation of Granddad-induced weirdo's that supplemented mother's menagerie of resident spooks, was on the roof of the privy itself. I raced through the house and into the yard, hopped on the dustbin then onto the wall, from there jumped to grip the roof edge and pulled myself up and sat swinging my legs waiting for mother. I wasn't worried for although she never forgave a slight and could hold a grudge forever, you only had to stay out of her reach for the first ten seconds after her blowing her top, then you were safe from physical harm.

She charged in the yard like a bull on the gore, furious at being exposed as an object of ridicule to people she knew, who openly sniggered and muttered demeaning asides

regarding her tatterdemalion appearance. She glared around, then up at me.

“Wheerizzy?” She demanded.

“Wheerzoo?” I asked innocently.

For a moment I thought she was going to throw something at me, but suddenly wheeled and stormed indoors back to her interminable washing. The door slammed behind her with such force as to shake the house to its foundations. I sighed with relief at weathering the storm.

For a while I sat wondering what to do, then it dawned on me I was free to do whatever I pleased. Mother had been anticipating my approaching incarceration in a school with such obvious glee, that I got the impression I was to be locked away never to see the light of day again. So I thought this an ideal opportunity to seek some adventures on my own, whilst still at liberty to do so.

I dropped onto the backyard wall, and swayed along it towards the street pretending I was Blondin. A little old lady thinking I was up to no good ran out of her back door and tried to dislodge me with a broom. I easily evaded her pokes and went on my way. On reaching the end of the wall I dropped down in the street, and followed a tantalising aroma my nose had picked up into Brook Street, where stood a chip-shop in full fry.

I stood at the doorway looking in. The woman of the shop had just served a couple of customers, but it was her husband I wanted. He appeared from the back, a tall handsome dark-haired man with two buckets of potatoes chipped and ready to fry, suspended from hooks, where his hands used to be. This wasn't an unusual sight as there were many like him around at the time, flotsam cast up by the war with all manner of bits missing.

“Any scraps mister?” I begged politely. I had done this before and he'd never refused me. He glanced towards the woman and nodded, who shovelled bits of cremated chips and scraps of batter dredged from the boiling fat onto a newspaper, wrapped and handed it to me. I gravely thanked my benefactors and headed for the street, the newspaper becoming warm and soggy as fat soaked into it.

After that tasty snack, my next destination was the market where I knew food lay in abundance, and begged of the fruit and vegetable vendors for permission to investigate discarded crates and boxes dumped by their stalls for edible salvage. Some gave grudging permission, others told me where to go, but I remember having quite a feast of specked oranges, bruised apples and melting brown bananas, amongst other things.

I don't know how I knew where to go or the drill to follow when I got there, but I arrived at a biscuit factory in Moorbrook Street, and skulked outside the gates watching a lorry unload empty biscuit tins onto a bay. When it trundled off around a corner, I nipped in the yard and onto the bay and shook the tins for the rewarding sound of broken biscuits. Most were empty, but some contained treasure that ranged from old and fusty to crisp and toothsome, which I crammed into mouth and pockets until a warning shout of. “OI! YA LITTLE BUGGER!” Sent me scampering for safety with my loot.

After hours of adventure and rich pickings, I set sail for home, breezed into the house and sat expectantly at the table with spoon in hand, primed and ready to top up my scavenging with some real food. Mother scowled at me, but made no mention of the earlier escapade at the police station with Granddad. She filled a basin with Irish stew

from a big pot on the stove, plonked it down in front of me and to my delight, a large sage-speckled dumpling rose out like a rock from the stew. It was just the right epicurean treat to round off a fine day of foraging. I beamed my appreciation at mother, who glowered malevolently back.

For the remaining few weeks before starting school, I was allowed to run wild and got myself into all kinds of trouble. There was a sawmill on Brook Street and somehow I'd gotten up on the roof and trod on a felt-covered skylight. I could never understand why skylights were built into roofs, then covered with felt. But I was lucky for I pitched forward with only my legs going through the glass, whilst the rest of me clung desperately to the roof.

There was a lot of yelling from below, mainly instructing me not to move. I suppose I could have levered myself out, but instinct prompted me to play the victim and not the vandal. After a while the top of a ladder clattered against the roof and a familiar helmet popped up. A policeman had sped here on a bike, the forerunner of the Flying Squad, and he and a workman gingerly lifted me out of the shattered skylight and got me down the ladder. I shuddered when I saw the fearsome array of angular machinery I would have been impaled on if I had fallen through. After some questioning and a bandage applied to a gash on my leg I hadn't been aware of, the policeman took me home on the crossbar of his bike. Mother simmered a lot but said little, as the policeman told her of my lucky escape.

I was to be propelled homewards several times on the end of a strong arm of the law before the education system finally took me off the streets. My escapades producing family reactions ranging from father's silent stares, to mother gamut ting from resignation to going berserk and declaring I was a child of the devil. Well, she should know better than anybody about the ins-and-outs of that. And Granddad due to his precarious position as a lodger, opted for the neutral ground of no comment, whilst my senior siblings disowned me both publicly and privately.

Came the day of liberation for mother, the advent of my schooling. I had been reasonably accoutred for the event via a jumble sale, but distinctly unhappy as mother hauled me through the streets towards St. Peter's Primary School to begin my academic career, which was to last but a few hours at this particular school. Three times she threw me into the playground and as I headed back yet again for the gate and liberty, a teacher grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, ran me inside, dumped me in a seat and nailed me there with a brisk slap around the head. This language I understood perfectly, and made no further attempts to escape.

At break time, I stood at the playground railings overlooking railway lines, glumly watching trains steam by below. From this vantage point I could see barges entering and leaving the canal basin. Then the drone of a biplane slowly crawling across the sky claimed my attention, until a sharp tap on the shoulder caused me to turn. Four bigger boys stood behind me expressionless. "Hello?" I chirped amicably, and a fist flew at me from the biggest that flattened my nose and me simultaneously. As I lay there wondering what had happened, they wandered off, the hit man being warmly congratulated by his cohorts on his feat of arms.

The next break I slid into a corner hoping to be inconspicuous, and better able to defend myself should they come after me again. Then I saw the one who had thumped me engrossed in bouncing a ball against a wall all on his own, and sneaking up behind him I ran at him, hitting him squarely in the back with all my weight. He flew forward,

his face hitting the wall with some force before sliding to the ground in a wailing heap. The day called catchem had caught up with him, just like Granddad predicted it would.

When I saw the damage done to his face, I was appalled. So were the teachers and so was mother when summoned post haste to view the mayhem her offspring had caused. The lad seemed to have left most of his forehead and nose stuck to the wall. I was expelled on the spot, which led to a gibbering mother chasing me all the way home and it was fear inspired speed that kept me just out of her reach. For she almost had hold of my leg as I bounced up on to the lavvy roof where over the next few days, I spent more time than the pigeons did. As Wellington had observed after the Battle of Waterloo, it had been a damned close-run thing.

Not long after, she carted me off to St. Thomas's primary school. I went as meekly as a lamb to slaughter as experience had taught me resistance was useless. At break time, I shot into a corner of the yard with my back against a wall, prepared to fight off any welcoming committee. Sure enough, a deputation of three headed my way but to my surprise, they wished to parley.

"You the lad who tore another lad's face off at St. Peters?" Inquired their leader.

My first reaction was to deny this but second thoughts took precedence, so I nodded.

"Toldja it wuz 'im." Said their leader triumphantly. Then addressed me with. "Wanna join our mob, we're the cocks of the walk here?" I felt relief gushing over me like a warm comforting wave, unearned notoriety preceding me had saved my bacon. I nodded and said. "Yeh! Why not?" With all the nonchalance I could muster.

But my tenure as a member of St. Thomas's elite was to be short lived. For soon I was off to a faraway place with strange exotic names, and those mean cobbled streets becoming a fading memory to be replaced, paradoxically, with a notable seat of higher learning.



- *The redoubtable Ma Barker, who seems to have shrunk with the passage of time.*