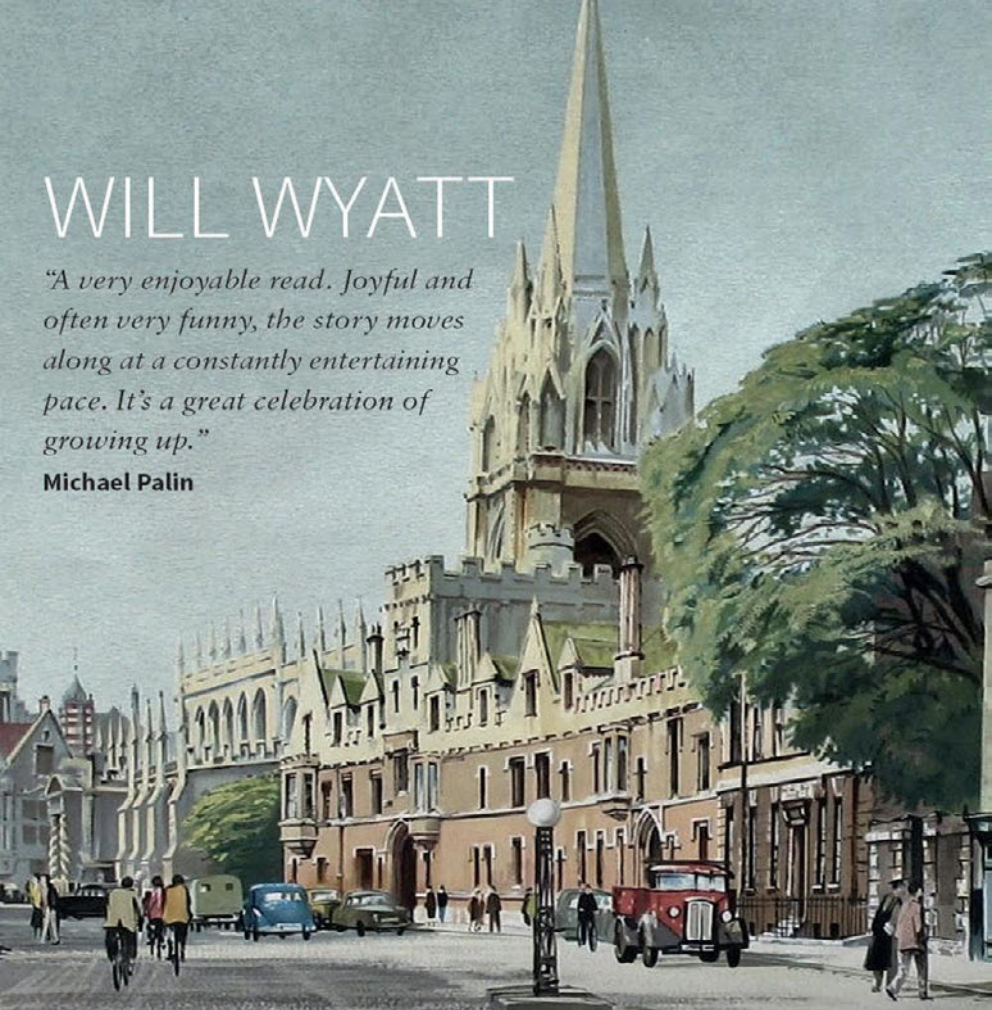


WILL WYATT

"A very enjoyable read. Joyful and often very funny, the story moves along at a constantly entertaining pace. It's a great celebration of growing up."

Michael Palin



OXFORD BOY

A POST-WAR TOWNIE CHILDHOOD



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OXFORD BOY

A POST-WAR TOWNIE CHILDHOOD

WILL WYATT



With Mum and Dad in the University Parks.

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For Honey

Introduction

“There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.” Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory*

I have always thought each of us should remember, record and relate what we can of our lives. I have often kept diaries. When my father was widowed I gave him a tape recorder and a list of questions and urged him to respond to them of a winter evening. He did. I had the material transcribed and edited it into a volume for his ninetieth birthday. The big human story, the encyclopaedia of our world, is comprised of our individual stories, everyone unique. The tales will overlap, duplicate and contradict each other. They are not all of equal novelty, significance or fascination, but each places another inimitable pebble on the cairn. I hereby add one more modest volume to the vast library of childhoods.

People often say they are proud of their parents or of their ancestry, that they come from a long line of miners or sailors or dukes, that the family have lived in Appleby or Hackney or Aberdeenshire for generations, that the estate has been in the family for centuries. All interesting but why should they be proud of something they have had no influence on, no say in and done nothing to bring about? The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* has pride as “a feeling of elation or high satisfaction derived from some action or possession”. Quite so. Our ancestry, our parents, derive from no action of ours and they are in no way a possession. So I don’t feel I have the right to be proud of my parents but I do know that I was lucky to have them. I hope they were proud of me in that I most certainly derived from their actions and they had every reason to be proud of themselves. In the same way, I can’t claim I am proud to have been born and brought up in Oxford, much as I love the city. I just turned up there and then came to understand how fortunate I was.

I had the idea of writing this book after standing next in the gents to Bryan Magee, philosopher, politician, writer and broadcaster.

“What are you writing at the moment?” I asked.

“I am writing about my childhood,” said Bryan, adding, “Up to the age of nine.”

“Golly, how vain,” I replied discourteously, meaning only that there must be an awful lot of volumes to come. He was understandably put out. That book was *Clouds of Glory*, a vivid account of his boyhood in Hoxton, then a crime-ridden slum. I can in no way emulate Bryan’s achievement in that book but it did plant the seed. I had long intended to write something about the eleven plus shenanigans and doorway it provided. Bryan’s work encouraged me to go beyond.

I have sought to indicate where my memory may not be sound; where I have been able to check I have done so. Nevertheless, I know that I will have made errors – only small ones, I hope – for which I apologise in advance. Memory is fallible, tells us fibs and repeats its own legends. If I have been unfair to anyone, well, that’s how they seemed to this boy at the time. Some names have been changed, most haven’t.

My memory of the family was jogged and gaps coloured in by my brother, David, and my cousin, Anne Bennett, with a jot or two added by Mick Wyatt, Ron Wyatt and Charlotte Hooper. School memories were prompted and augmented by John Cooke, Robert Herbertson, Tim Hunt, Alan Pemberton, Laurence Simmons and Richard Warnock. My thanks to all.

Eddie Mirzoeff was generous enough to read the whole manuscript and provide blunt criticism as well as encouragement and valuable suggestions; Iain Johnstone did the same for one or two early chapters. They improved what I had written and saved some embarrassments.

For the chapters about Magdalen College School I leaned upon D. L. L. Clarke’s updating of the school history and purloined material about Bob Stanier from his wife Maida’s *Portrait of a Schoolmaster*.

One other person read every word and discussed them with me, my wife Jane. She knows that my thanks to her include this but run far wider and deeper.

1. The Point of a Pencil



May Day at Phil and Jim primary school. WW in profile third left of standing boys. I may have been partner to Valerie Gardiner.

I normally had no reason to return to school after hours. We had no homework, no clubs, no after school games. In the summer, I would play in the garden with my brother, walk to Port Meadow to fish or to the University Parks to watch cricket. In winter, I would stay warm inside to play with model soldiers and Dinky toys or watch the newly arrived television. So my short journey this late afternoon in March 1953 was unusual. From our front door I crossed Kingston Road to Sibley's electrical shop on the corner opposite and then walked a hundred yards or so along Leckford Road, passing the spot where I once tried shoe skating on the ice-covered pavement and had fallen, chipping my new front tooth. I turned into Leckford Place to the school gate carrying only my pencil case and a rubber. It was a walk that would determine much of the rest of my life.

Earlier in the day I had sat the eleven plus examination at SS Philip and James Church of England Primary School, "Phil and Jim". Our headmaster, Mr Gray, had told me to return later with the same writing implements I had used in the exam. Another boy was there, as well. Otherwise the school was empty and quiet. Now, Mr Gray led us to his study and produced the maths and intelligence papers we had completed that morning. He pointed out some questions we had answered wrongly and all but held our pencils as we corrected them. Were there lots of mistakes to correct? I cannot recall. I am sure there were enough to make the exercise meaningful. Was I aware that something that should not happen was happening? I am not sure. There must have been a conspiratorial air to the occasion but I was crossing none of the lines that marked good from bad for me then. This was my headmaster and I was doing his bidding. My parents knew I had been summoned back after hours and seemed to think it was a good idea. They had even been out for a drink with Mr Gray and his attractive wife.

But there were only two of us boys present. Where were my other friends? Did I know if they were summoned back as well? If I thought about it at all I must have assumed not. Did I fret about being picked out in this way? I don't think so. I was a goody-goody boy and keen to please. I went along with it all. We were not there long. Mr Gray seemed satisfied with the changes we had made and the other boy and I went our separate ways home.

Some weeks earlier I had been told to write a composition on the subject of "Oxford", the city in which we lived. I handed in my work and Mr. Gray took me through it suggesting some improvements. In particular, he said to end the essay with a flourish, "from the motor car factory at Cowley to the cobble stones of Merton Street." I rewrote the essay with just that ending. These were certainly not my own words. Everybody in Oxford knew about Morris's Motors factory but I had never been to Merton Street and this was the first I had heard of cobble stones there. My new version was deemed satisfactory and Mr Gray had said, "Memorise it." I did and thought no more about it. Lo and behold, when I came to sit the eleven plus the subject we were asked to write a composition on was "My

Home Town". I delivered. The results would be known in a couple of months.

Phil and Jim was a small, very urban school with a brick and concrete air raid shelter under the big chestnut tree by the street wall. It was mixed to the age of seven then one form per year of boys only from eleven to the school leaving age of fifteen. A.G.B. Gray, proudly ex RAF, was head of this boys' school. He was cheery, buoyant presence, a portly man with crinkly black hair. Yet we feared him. He loped around the school in the fat man's way with arms dangling straight, palms facing to the rear. Unless, that is, he was patrolling with his cane. Armed in this way, he came across an older boy called Trego whistling in the corridor and whacked him about the head and shoulders for this, or so the story ran round the school.

I had begun at the mixed infants next door when I was three and a half under the kindly care of Miss Brucker. I remember an immensely tall woman, silver hair in a bun, riding a sit up and beg bicycle to and from school. On my first day I had to be fetched home crying, the emotion of which rather than any detail I remember. We learned reading and writing before a daily rest on camp beds. Miss Marston's class was next. She was severe of aspect but not of manner. We sat at individual desks arranged in rows before her. She taught us sums, impressing the need for neatness. I have the image of her carrying the teachers' mid-morning drink, a large cup of steaming hot milk with Camp Coffee, a brown mostly chicory liquid added from a bottle. The smell lingers.

The headmistress of the infants was the distant and strict Miss Hodge. She had an adopted son, Joscelyn, a name we had some difficulty with as we knew of a girl called Joscelyn and any idiot knew you simply could not call a boy by a girl's name. We only caught glimpses of Joscelyn for he went to a different school, one you paid for someone said. I think Miss Hodge was probably a very good teacher. She certainly ran a tight ship. An older boy called Schofield, who came from Jericho way, borrowed another's boy's bike for a ride or rather "stole it" according to the charge sheet. Miss Hodge believed punishment should be witnessed as well as

undergone. She put a chair in front of the class and tied Schofield to it with some rope, gagging him with a yellow black board duster fastened behind his head. There he remained for the afternoon. I felt sorry for him. He was often in trouble. It wasn't so much that he did not have a bike – few boys had them – but I sensed there were quite a few things Schofield did not have.

I fell foul of Miss Hodge on a couple of occasions. She caught another boy and me dropping our pencils on the floor so we could get under the big desk to see the girls' knickers. For this we had to write out lines, "I must not behave so badly in class". I didn't like this and in a moment of bravado exclaimed, "Damn these lines" in a voice loud enough for Miss Hodge to hear. The word "damn" prompted her to grab my ear and lead me by it out of the class to the cloakroom nearby. There she pushed my head down into a basin, ran the tap and washed out my mouth with soap and water. As a strategy for cleaning up my language this literalist approach failed. She had to do the same thing all over again a month or so later and I have been pretty foul mouthed for most of my life. She didn't threaten me as she did my brother when he refused to eat his slimy mashed potato at school dinner. "Jesus puts a black cross on the forehead of bad boys," she said, standing over him till he finished it, gagging on every mouthful.

A highlight of the year was May Day. This was not for any political reason but as a folksy festive occasion when the six and seven year olds would dance round the maypole in front of the parents. The first year I was to be part of this was a disaster. We had rehearsed skip dancing this way and that, passing the red, white and blue ribbons over and under until they made a satisfying plait at the top of the pole. On the morning of the great day I rushed into the boys' lavatory for a pee but in an excited hurry instead of turning the corner inside to the pee gutter, I simply peed up against the wall at the back. Horror of horrors, I was spotted by some tell-tale girls who dashed to teacher to describe the disgusting sight they had witnessed. Sight of what? The back of a six-year-old and his damp stream. It was more than enough. I was to be shamed, dropped from the maypole dance and sent inside to sit it out on my own.

I did make the dance the following year and there is a photograph to prove it. The maypole was raised in the centre of the small concrete playground between the infants' school and the church hall where school dinners were served. Shortly before twelve o'clock, the hot food arrived in great steel containers delivered by van from some central kitchen. Save for a very few occasions I happily avoided the contents of these threatening vessels as I could walk home for dinner.

When we were seven the girls disappeared and we went into the big boys' school next door, a fence separating the playgrounds. Here the teachers were all male. Rumours of terrible rituals for newcomers were not borne out and we began in the cosy class of Mr Cox. "Old Cocker" seemed awfully old. He bicycled so slowly up Leckford Road that he seemed bound to wobble off. He spoke with a soft Berkshire accent and told us stories of the ancient Britons on the Ridgeway, the legend of Wayland's Smithy and the Blowing Stone with which King Alfred was said to have summoned his troops, all features of his native heath out near Wantage. For nature study we were issued folders, alternating pages of thick grey paper and tissue, in which I pressed wild flowers: bird's-foot trefoil, speedwell, tufted vetch, shepherd's purse, buttercups, scarlet pimpernels, yarrow, cornflowers and scabious.

I loved the history tales and the flowers but Cocker's special hobby did not hook me in the same way. He made miniature steam engines, not railway-engines but little jewel-like stationary engines of brass and copper. When fed with water and fuelled by tiny lumps of coal or methylated spirits, they puffed smoke from the chimney and powered a polished shaft. I could admire but making such things was beyond me. I came top of Cocker's small class. His comment was, "Has done a good year's work but his work is not always neat enough". And so it was always to be.

Mr Phillips, a specialist in handicrafts, took the next year up. He was a slim pale-skinned man and I was fascinated by the fair hairs on the back of his hand as he sought to help me in the mysteries of raffia work. Under his tutelage, I was able to make a basket or two but that was about it. Mr Phillips caned us on our upturned hands.

We would involuntarily draw the palm back and forth as if trying to balance an invisible pencil in anticipation of the pain. He had mastered an impressive whippy action and rarely missed the palm.

In the mornings we lined up by class in the playground and on the sound of a whistle marched into the school, top class first. Sports were limited given the size of the school estate. There was PE sometimes in the playground when it was dry. We played cricket there with a tennis ball and stumps drawn on the wall. Later, we were taken as a treat to play football on the bumpy grass of Port Meadow, a huge area of open pasture booby-trapped with cowpats and horse poo. In the holidays we even managed cricket there with a slight mound serving as our pavilion and grandstand.

There was much excitement when Mr Gray arranged a football match against Wolvercote School. For this Phil and Jim provided us with proper jerseys, dark blue and light blue quarters. These colours carried a charge. The university did not touch my world directly but you couldn't be a boy in Oxford without supporting the dark blues against the Cambridge light blues, in the boat race above all, but also the cricket and rugby matches. And then there was Pegasus, an amateur football team comprising former Oxford and Cambridge blues, which was based in Oxford and cutting a dash in the then high-profile amateur football world. Dad used to take me with him to watch them play on the Iffley Road pitch and I glowed when he knew a lot of people in the crowd. "Who was that, Dad?" "He works for Hinkins and Frewin." Or "He's one of the Coppocks." Or "That's old so and so. He used to spit in our blacking," which I learned was someone you knew but not that well. The Pegs won the FA Amateur Cup in 1951 and 1953 in front of 100,000 capacity crowds at Wembley, Dad and I among them. (The programme recorded the schools and Oxbridge colleges of the Pegasus players.) They played in flapping white shirts but were the dark and light blues in every other way. Wolvercote School had its own pitch with goal posts so this was our big time. There were even people shouting on the touchline. We lost but did not let our proud colours down.

An ambitious cricket fixture at the Dragon School, Oxford's most famous prep school, was rather different. We only ever played cricket in the playground or midst the cow pats of Port Meadow so this was to be the first time we had experienced wooden stumps and umpires. Although not much more than a quarter of a mile away the Dragon was terra incognita. None of us knew anyone who went there. This was an upwardly mobile move by Mr Gray. I am not sure which of the Dragon's many teams we played, certainly not the first.

We arrived at their extensive grounds excited and apprehensive. It was all like the real thing, hard ball, pads, the lot. They batted first. The one thing I was particularly good at was catching so it was mortifying when one of their early batsmen put up a dolly to me at mid-off and I dropped it. No matter, they were all out for "only" 116 which, everyone agreed, was jolly good going on our part. There was a tea with sandwiches, then we went in and were all out for just sixteen. We felt and were humiliated, not least because they were all so insufferably, bloody nice about it. Shouts of "hard luck" and "just when you looked set" at each display of incompetence. Even at ten I knew we were being patronised. The match was a kind of social work for the Dragon. A dim thought struggled to tell me that there might be more of this in life and I would have to deal with it.

Phil and Jim was in Leckford Road on the border of poshest North Oxford and the more modest houses of what estate agents now dub Walton Manor. Some, probably less well-off, dons did send their sons to the school but most boys were very much townies. Of my chums' fathers, one was the verger at St Giles' Church, one worked at the Clarendon Printers, another worked at Morris'. Mind you, Jeremy Taylor's dad did go to work in a suit. Few displayed any signs of money but we knew that the poorer boys wore black plimsolls rather than shoes or summer sandals and came from Jericho, streets of urban cottages off Walton Street. Their school should have been Barney, St Barnabas, where we knew the boys were much rougher and tougher than us.

Jeremy Taylor was my best friend. His garden backed onto the Oxford Canal and we could fish there. One hot summer afternoon

after school, he and I had an almighty, sweaty, fight on the corner of Leckford and Kingston Roads, both crying from effort and frustration. Neil Butler was a spindly boy with specs, prone to tears and a sulk when given out at cricket. He owned the bat and ball but we would not let him take them home. He would hang about sobbing till he ingratiated himself back into the game by doing a bit of desultory fielding. We let him join in again as if nothing had happened. Terry Collier, born on exactly the same day as me, was tall and athletic and went to a proper swimming club. Michael Hagerty was an eager bouncy fellow. "Hey, that's genuine spam," he exclaimed when I showed him what was in my sandwiches on a coach outing to the anti-climax that was "California in England." I remember him standing back from a painting he had done in class and asking in his best grown up way, "Shall I give it another coat?" Tony Faulkner's dark hair flopped into his right eye and my mum said he would need glasses soon. And he did.

Tony Belcher and I were best playground chums, galloping synchronously, arms linked behind our backs on noble adventures. Alan Whitaker was a tall, kindly friend who played brass musical instruments and made model aircraft. Pipsy Parsons was an impish boy with a small face and fair hair like a pile of pancakes on his head. When in February 1952 Mr Gray opened the door of our class interrupting the lesson to tell us solemnly that the King had died that morning, Pipsy looked round the room and grinned. It was the excited grin of one aware that something momentous was taking place but the head was furious. He gave Pipsy a serious caning. I don't remember much bullying. There was a big boy called Parker who lived in a large house directly opposite the school. He was sent home by the headmaster several times for thumping someone or losing his temper. But he's the one I remember crying and even on one occasion running out of the school and back home across the road.

There was poor Cleghorn, an awkward boy with few friends. He invited a number of us to his birthday party which was to be held on a Saturday in a Chinese restaurant in the middle of the city. This was an exotic invitation. Birthday parties, when they were held at

all, were just jelly and cakes and running riot in the birthday boy's house, possibly with a game or two, musical chairs or the Hokey Cokey. I had never been to a restaurant. That it was to be Chinese was a worry but Cleghorn informed us that it would be all right. My mum bought a present for me to take, a wooden pencil box, the top half of which swivelled to reveal a bottom compartment. At four o'clock on the Saturday all the invited boys assembled with a parent outside the restaurant. By half past four it was evident that Cleghorn was not going to show. The restaurant knew nothing. There was no party. He had made it up. We went home.

At school on Monday we reassembled and held a council of war. Yes, we were going to "get" Cleghorn. We told him to hide somewhere at playtime and warned him that if we found him the "getting" would take place. The playground was small and other than going round a corner of the building, easily checked, the only possible hiding spots were behind a couple of scrubby bushes. Sure enough we straightway saw that he was stooping behind one of these. Yet, without discussing it, none of us let on that we knew where he was. We caught each other's eye and an act of clemency was passed without a word spoken. I used the pencil box myself.

We had playground games other than cricket and "footer" as we called it. We collected fag cards, sets of picture cards of sportsmen, figures from history, regimental badges and uniforms, film stars, aeroplanes, kings and queens, cars, railway engines et al, which came in cigarette packets. With these we played "knock downs" and "on tops", flicking the card to hit a target card propped against a wall or trying to cover cards on the ground. Success meant you picked up all the relevant cards in play. Such games did nothing for the condition of the cards which for us were for playing with not sticking in albums.

In September conkers ruled. With a kitchen skewer you made a hole through the glossy brown fruit of the horse chestnut, threaded it with a foot-long piece of string and tied a knot below. You were then ready to challenge or be challenged by another conker owner. After a cry of "Iddy iddy onker my first conker, iddy iddy oh my first go" each took alternate turns at striking the top of the other's

conker with a downward swing of one's own until one or other broke up. If both conkers were virgin combatants the winner would now be a "twoer", if the loser had been already a "fourer", say, the winner became a "fiver". Some weapons were gnarled from oven baking or soaking in vinegar, both frowned upon but common.

In winter, we would take a run to slide on a long patch of ice in the playground, grandstanding to perform "little man" or "one foot". We were cowboys, knights and other heroes galloping in pairs and in step, arms linked behind our backs, wind in our hair as we raced and rescued. Occasionally there would be massive game of bums and barrels. Each member of one team would bend head down making a back, one behind the other, head to bum, in a line from a wall. A member of the other team ran to jump onto the backs wiggling himself forward towards the wall. Then the next player and the next till the line of backs collapsed under the weight. There were laughs, tears and cries of pain. Injuries were rarely more than bloody knees from the gritty playground. We all wore grey flannel short trousers and my knees were permanently encrusted with scabs from grazes. These one absent-mindedly ran a finger over relishing the smooth pitted surface before slowly picking, lifting it off in one piece if possible. Even more satisfying than picking one's nose.

We were taken by coach for swimming lessons at Temple Cowley Baths, nearly half an hour away. The swimming was fun but there lurked a terror of what one might catch at the pool. The word "verruca" cast an ominous shadow. I never saw one, never had one and I never heard that any of the others boys did, but "verruca" and "swimming pool" went together like tooth ache and sweets. I did get my certificate for swimming across the pool, ten yards, and another for swimming a length, 25 yards. The worst thing that happened on a swimming trip was when I fell out of the emergency door of the coach as it swung left from Woodstock Road into Bevington Road. I crashed onto the curb. Fortunately, there was no vehicle following and I rose and walked clutching my left side towards the now stationary coach and a worried looking teacher. There must have been some sort of examination back at the school

but the only treatment I had was to be taken home for the rest of the day.

The teacher on the coach was Mr Rowley, now my class teacher. I liked Mr Rowley and under him I came top again. He had a boyish face, fair floppy hair and a cheery laugh. The curriculum was religious knowledge, English – reading aloud, dictation, composition, poetry and speech – history (my favourite subject), geography, “elementary science including nature study, hygiene”, crafts, PT, (physical training), music and arithmetic including mental arithmetic. Mr Rowley drove a Rover, a cut above any other car we knew the owner of. He was proud of it and sought successfully to impress us with the average speed he had achieved on a drive from York to Oxford, a figure he made us work out for ourselves. It was about twenty miles per hour.

In the late spring of 1953 my parents received a letter from the Oxford Education Committee; “On the results of the Annual Schools Examination it has been decided that your child Alan (as I was christened) Wyatt is suitable for admission to a secondary (grammar) school.” It asked them to choose from the list of three schools and promised “free tuition and books irrespective of the parents’ financial circumstances”.

In Oxford the eleven plus was not simply pass or fail. Everyone knew there was a hierarchy of passes. At the top was Magdalen College School, a direct grant school, which meant that half the places were fee paying and the other half awarded free on the results of the eleven plus, half of these thirty or so free places going to boys from the city, half to boys from the county. This was my parents’ first choice. The other two, the excellent City of Oxford High School and perfectly good Southfield School in that order, were both entirely free grammar schools. A second letter confirmed that I had been accepted for Magdalen. Mum and Dad were thrilled. This is what it had all been about, getting two boys from Phil and Jim into the top school. Mr Gray had no children of his own. Was he simply making sure that a couple of bright boys got the best possible leg up in life? Or was it swagger? Look what a great school

that Mr Gray runs! Two boys to Magdalen this year! Certainly, the latter, probably both.

The summer term was a happy one. Mr and Mrs Gray joined some of our neighbours to watch the Coronation on the television set we had owned for a year or more. Mum served ham sandwiches and beer. A British expedition climbed Everest and *The Eagle* comic illustrated the route they had taken. We children were told often that The New Elizabethan age had arrived. England won back the Ashes, the dashing Denis Compton hitting the winning runs. All was well with the world.

My class teacher that last year at Phil and Jim was the quiet and dignified Mr Flello, whose gentle authority I remember fondly. I have still the form prize he gave me, two volumes of *The Concise History of Britain*, which came in useful for notes and essays at my new school. His unusual name has allowed me to look him up and discover that he had spent three years as a prisoner of the Japanese. Had we boys known this at the time it would have impressed us greatly. It impresses me now. There were no leaving ceremonies at primary schools in those days. Celebrations of any success were muted, no leaping about, air punching or whooping. No special assembly, no parents' event, no concert. Most of my friends were going to the High School or Southfield, one or two to a new technical school, Cheney, and one or two just stayed on at the secondary modern rump, tiny as it was, of Phil and Jim.

Did I feel guilty about what had helped me along? After all I was above the age of criminal responsibility, old enough to be arrested and charged with a crime. But, no, I didn't. Somehow it had just happened and I took it for granted. At eleven what is, just is. Did I feel guilty later and do I feel guilty now? I would much rather I had sailed to Magdalen without the cheating but guilty, no. Would I have gone anyway? Impossible to know, but probably not if I had to bet. Whose place did I then take? Another impossible question. In my defence, or perhaps in Mr Gray's defence, I did not waste the place. I flourished at the new school. Not a strong defence I accept: pleading guilty to stealing with mitigating circumstances, namely that you spent the money wisely.

Was Mr Gray lucky to get away with it? Were lots of heads at it? Not long ago I saw a story in the press, “A head teacher was jailed today for changing pupils’ exam answers because he thought they had more ability than they showed, Judge Keith Simpson said “The damage that can be done by this sort of activity should never be underestimated. If others behaved in that way the whole system would be utterly destroyed – and that cannot happen.” Such tales crop up from time to time.

A few years ago I told the story of my eleven plus to an Oxford professor who was neither shocked nor surprised. She straightway replied, “Yes, I cheated in my eleven plus, too. When I sat the maths paper, I saw questions which had figures and dots in between. I’d never seen these before. So, I put up my hand and said I was feeling terribly ill. I was taken out and my mother came to fetch me. She rang up my uncle who was a doctor and he provided me with a medical certificate which confirmed I was ill. I was, thus, allowed to re-sit the examination several weeks later after an intensive course of private coaching in decimals.” There must have been many more.

From the outcome of that eleven plus exam I can trace a direct line determining the thing most important to me, my family. All our lives are full of might-have-beens and what ifs, moments when a small decision or chance led to a string of consequences. Some are trivial: “if I’d not had a coffee in that café I would not have heard someone talking about that author who is now my favourite.” Some are life changing: “I was last to arrive and took the only seat remaining on the coach next to the man who gave me my first job.” The film *Sliding Doors* played out two different lives of a woman decided by her just catching or just missing a tube train. Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken” considers how a moment of capricious choice can dictate a life:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Mr Gray's eleven plus scam was not a stroke of chance, though like everyone else I have experienced a share. It was not a shall I, shan't I, might as well go this way decision. It was a plot, albeit one I entered into unconsciously. And when I consider my daughters or my granddaughter they are the direct result. Without the cheating they would not exist and my life would be immeasurably poorer.

For without Mr Gray's scheme I'm sure I would have passed the eleven plus but at a lower level. I would probably have gone to the City of Oxford High School, where I would likely have prospered. But would any teacher there have given me such an edge as to exceed my abilities as Peter Arnold-Craft did at Magdalen College School? Unlikely, but possible. In which case, I would have found my way to university, Oxford even and who knows, on to journalism and the BBC. But most certainly Dr Peter Brooks would not have taught me and it was he who suggested I apply to Emmanuel College, Cambridge. I knew nothing of the college and without Dr Brooks would never have thought of it. Had I not gone to Emma, I would not have been placed in the next room to fellow scholar Richard Archer. No Richard, then I would not have shared War on Want lunches with his school friend Joe Tatton-Brown. No Joe, and I would never have met his Hertfordshire neighbour, Cathy Wells. No Cathy Wells, no best friend of hers, Jane Bagenal. No Jane, no daughters, Hannah and Rozzy, and no fifty-year marriage; no Rozzy, no granddaughter, Honey.

How could I feel that this should not have happened? The whole of a life balanced on the point of a sharpened pencil.